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SWEET WILLIAM, THE TRAPPER DETECTIVE; Or, THE CHIEF OF THE CRIMSON CLAN.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "EQUINOX TOM," "SOL SCOTT," "ALABAMA JOE," "JACK RABBIT," "CAPTAIN COOL-BLADE," "PACIFIC PETE," ETC., ETC.



"MURDER HAS BEEN DONE, AND VENGEANCE CALLED FOR IN THE NAME OF THE VIGILANCE COMMITTEE. WE ARE BOUND BY SOLEMN OATH TO LISTEN TO AND INVESTIGATE EVERY APPEAL TO OUR AUTHORITY."

Sweet William, THE TRAPPER DETECTIVE; OR, The Chief of the Crimson Clan.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "JOAQUIN, THE SADDLE KING,"
"EQUINOX TOM," "SOL SCOTT," "ALABAMA
JOE," "JOAQUIN, THE TERRIBLE."

CHAPTER I.

A MODERN MIRACLE.

"HURRAY fer hurraw! Three cheers fer the Fo'th o' July! Hurray!"

A shrill, cracked voice that shot through the congregation with a startling, varied effect, opening with a bold enthusiasm, but sliding into a sickly chuckle at the last, when it found itself unsupported by any other.

The target of a hundred eyes, the luckless being whose misplaced zeal bade fair to result in broken bones, if no worse, shifted uneasily upon his seat, vainly striving at nonchalant ease, then staring around with gloomy frown as though intent only upon discovering the irreverent disturber of the ceremonies.

The red light of the fires brighten the night and pale the white rays of the rising moon. Beneath the wide-spreading oak tree stands a rude, hastily erected rostrum. Upon this stand, three men, of widely differing types if of the same nationality, are facing the gathered crowd and, until the rude interruption occurred, are holding them spellbound. But now, with widely different emotions the congregation turn their attention to the bold intruder, and more than one stern-bent brow relaxes into a smile of half-pity, half-contempt.

A rider, though not a horseman, meets their gaze. A young man, tall, stout, his limbs and body shapely, his features well formed in themselves, his eyes full and bright, his yellow hair falling below his shoulders in curling locks; but there is something lacking.

His members seem ready to drop from their sockets. His head droops upon one shoulder, and a sickly grin distorts his face. His expression is that of a half-witted booby.

His charger! fitting mate to its outlandish master. A long-bodied, raw-boned steer of the Texan breed, its sole claim to beauty being its long, taper and wide-spreading horns, snowy white near their base, but like polished ebony at the tips. A blanket-saddle, rope reins and girth; furniture that accorded well with the raiment of the rider. Rags upon rags of every imaginable hue and dye clothed his limbs, as the loose, hairy feathers of the great horned owl serve its purpose. A ragged and flaming red handkerchief was bound around his head. Before him rested a long rifle, bound with thongs, patched with bits of tin and leather.

The threatening anger that first swayed the crowd quickly moderated as they noted the fantastic intruder and read the idiotic confusion in his reddening face. There was something painfully ridiculous in his appearance, in the vaguely apprehensive expression of his protuberant eyes. A low laugh ran through the crowd.

But the frown upon the faces of the three men occupying the rostrum grew deeper and blacker. The foremost, tall, angular and awkward in appearance, thrust his long head beyond the railing, speaking in a deep, harsh voice:

"Young man, the devil is lying in wait at your elbow! You come to scoff at the true religion and its believers, but the fathomless pit is yawning black behind you. Take heed to your ways. All who repent and abandon their evil courses shall be saved, but those who doubt and scoff at the Prophet of the True and Only Religion shall be eternally doomed to serve the Devil and his unholy household?"

"Bet ye a dollar 'n a bit he'd kick me out o' his house in less 'n a week, or else he's a more patient master than ever I tried to sarve afore."

The crowd laughed explosively. The self-styled Prophet frowned black as night, and glared at the stranger as though he would fain blast him with his eyes. But the simpleton seemed innocent of evil intent, and smiled genially in return.

"Who and what are you that dare interrupt our awful services? Speak! or I'll call down the fire of heaven upon your impious head to blast you as you scoff!" harshly thundered the Prophet.

"Simon Singleton, boss," promptly responded the stranger. "When folks git mad at me, they call me Si Simpleton. Them as don't know any better, call me Fool or Simple Simon. But the birds an' the beasts know me better. They come an' talk to me in the night when I lay in the woods, an' they fetch me grub to eat, an' tell me heaps o' strange things. No, boss; I ain't no fool. I can't read in writin' nur in books, but I kin do better—"

"Peace, friend," and a good-natured giant touched the ragged arm. "We know you're a good-hearted fellow who didn't mean any harm,

but we come here to listen to graver words than you kin speak. Have patience, lad; be silent and hearken to the words of the wise and holy man."

"Then this ain't the Fo'th o' July, nur this ain't no cellerbration?" faltered Simon, his broad face clouding with disappointment.

"No; you're one day ahead o' time. To-morrow's the Fourth. But hush—an' listen."

Smothering his anger at the untimely interruption, the self-styled Prophet resumed his harangue. His words were rude and unpolished and full of false sophistry, but his audience was not a closely critical one. Full half of the number placed implicit faith in his bold assertions, as they would had his claim been even more impious; and two-thirds of the others were carried away even against their will by his rude, impassioned eloquence. Surely this man was an impostor? And yet, if so, he was imposing upon himself as well.

His oration, impious to blasphemy, cannot find record here, nor would the scene be dwelt upon at all, only that some of its incidents formed an important link in the story which I am writing.

Prominent among the listeners was Simple Simon. He stretched his form along the back of his queer charger, his elbows supported by the broad horns, his chin resting upon his hands. He seemed to drink in every word as it fell sonorous, his big blue eyes never shifting from the face of the speaker.

"Children," and the Prophet's voice grew deep and impressive, "there are doubters and scoffers among ye, even as there was of old. The father of evil has blinded their eyes with his subtle wiles, and they see not the cruel snares that entangle their feet, preparing to cast them down to everlasting perdition. With bitter tongues and stinging sneers they call me accursed, because I labor to point out to them the one trail which will lead them to Sion. Inspired by the mocking fiend, they have dared me to the proof, thinking to cover me with confusion and ignominy. My heart was sore and heavy, but praying, I slept, and sleeping, the angel of the Lord came unto me and delivering the heavenly message, poured the balm of peace into my bleeding heart. The purport of that message you shall this night receive. I stand here the Prophet of the Most High. By His faith will I stand or fall."

Much more the impious fanatic said, but his words will read better if condensed and pruned of their wild blasphemy.

He invoked the Omnipotent to indorse his claims with some visible sign, or, if his words were false, to pour upon his perjured head the blasting fires of Heaven.

There was a pause of awful suspense.

In breathless silence the congregation stood. The Prophet raised his clasped hands on high, and seemed praying. His two acolytes sunk upon their knees, with abased heads.

A gasping sob agitated the expectant group as, feebly fluttering round in gradually narrowing circles, a snow-white dove became visible. Lower and lower the fair bird stooped until it rested upon the bared head of the Prophet. Then, as if spontaneously, a dozen voices burst into a song of praise.

The Prophet raised his hands and secured the dove. He pressed the bird to his lips and bosom, then opened his fingers. Fluttering once around the lighted glade, the bird vanished amid the shadows.

"Any fool could let a bird down from a tree with a string!" slowly uttered a deep, sonorous voice.

Like a *douche* of ice-water this skeptical speech fell upon the enthusiastic congregation, and they stared in mute amazement, seeking to discover the speaker, but in vain. A cry of furious anger burst from the Prophet's lips, and only for the quick grasp of his two companions, he would have leaped into the crowd to avenge the insult.

A short, whispered consultation seemed to restore his wonted composure, and motioning for silence, he spoke:

"There will be doubters till the end of time. There is one among us now, but he dare not show his face. If there is one spark of honor in his composition, he will step forward and face me like a man."

"If you are the Prophet you pretend, and gifted with powers denied to mere mortal man, you surely ought to be able to point me out," calmly added the voice from the crowd. "If you cannot do that much, you'd better sell out and give place to some one who can make good his pretenses."

The Prophet leaned far over the railing, his eyes ablaze, his thin, sallow face now deeply flushed, but before he could speak a strange occurrence took place.

Once more unseen lips spoke in solemn accents, but this time the words were not those of reviling.

"Peace, my son! You are but bearing the common lot of those beloved of Heaven. Let the impious doubter rail on. His doom is already written. Full soon he shall be delivered over to the just vengeance of those whom he has insulted—"

"By speaking the truth and exposing the stale tricks by which you are seeking to deceive and fleece an honest but simple-minded people. Down upon your knees, Joseph Smith, and ask pardon of those whom you are insulting with your blasphemous pretensions! Down, and humble yourselves, else you may learn that tar and feathers are known in Missouri as well as in Ohio!"

These sharply contrasting speeches were uttered in precisely the same voice, and apparently proceeded from the same point; from the darkness above the crowd, where the red glow of bonfires failed to penetrate.

Excitement the most intense prevailed. The rough-clad crowd was strongly agitated. There were shouts of rage from those who felt their religion insulted through their Prophet; peals of boisterous laughter from those more skeptical, mingling with shrieks of terror and sobs of strong emotion from the women.

But of all, none were so thoroughly aroused as Joseph Smith, the self-styled Prophet. He raised his clinched hands on high, his face upturned, his strong teeth gnashing, the white froth of insane fury flecking his bitten lips. Wild rage rendered his speech inarticulate, fortunately for his influence over his proselytes, for he, like many others, believed that those two speeches had fallen from the same pair of lips, and his furious imprecations, if understood, would have made some damaging revelations.

His two companions, Sidney Rigdon and Gerald Evans, were far less agitated, and fearing the consequences of this insane outburst, flung their arms around the raving Prophet and held him harmless.

A few words hissed in his ear warned him of the danger which threatened their precious cause, and the necessity of making some desperate effort to recover the ground they had so unexpectedly lost.

In a loud voice he addressed the gathering, and instantly the tumult was stilled. He declared that the Evil One and his satellites were abroad, seeking to undermine his influence for good. He dared the unseen speaker to make its appearance in visible shape and do battle with the Prophet of the religion against which its scoffings were directed; but neither word nor sign were given in reply.

"Behold! the truth is triumphant! The Evil One hides his head in the presence of true believers! He dares not arise and confront the mouth-piece of the Lord, lest the holy fire from Heaven should descend and wither his falsifying tongue! Behold! the religion of which I am the unworthy Prophet is the true and only one. If I speak falsely, let the might of Heaven's justice fall upon—"

A dark and shapeless mass shot down from the gloom above, falling fair upon the blasphemer's head, crushing him helpless to the floor!

CHAPTER II.

ALL FOR LOVE.

"You needn't wait up for me, Aunty, for it's likely I'll not be back until late," and Leo Friend paused before the little cracked mirror to give his necktie a last touch.

"All right, honey," and the fat negress shook all over with a silent laugh. "Make my manners to Miss Belle, an' tell her we-uns is mos' awful lonesome in dese yere parts, 'thout no mist'ess nor nuffin'—"

Leo hastened toward the stables, without reply, but, though his cheek flushed hotly at the words of Aunt Venus, he was anything but displeased. The words were true—the old farmhouse was lonely; how lonely he never realized until now, when he was about to put his fate upon one word—the yes or no, of fair Belle Gladden.

"I'll know it all before the moon goes down," he mused, as he caught a glimpse of the new moon over his shoulder. "She must know what I feel, and unless she felt kindly toward me she never would have consented to accompany me to-night. Only for that smooth-skinned Gerald Evans—I think of a snake every time I see him! And the old man so sweet on him. A bigger rascal than Joe Smith himself, or I am sadly out."

These thoughts did not hinder the young man in his preparations, and ere long his young mare was groomed and equipped for the road. The sun was just setting as he sprung into the saddle and struck out along the thickly timbered road which would lead him to the farm-house of Anderson Gladden, where dwelt the fair maiden whom he that night meant to ask to become his wife.

Nearly a week before, Leo Friend made the engagement which he was now hastening to keep. Joseph Smith, the self-styled Prophet of the Latter Day Saints, had promised to convince all doubters by Heavenly evidence that he and his religion were exactly what he claimed. Anderson Gladden was a devout believer in the Prophet, and if Belle held a different opinion it was not the fault of the father. The tidings spread like wild fire, and every man, woman and child for twenty miles around, made their arrangements to attend; some in hopes of witnessing a genuine miracle, others—and these

were by far the most numerous—to meet their friends and laugh at the trickery which they hoped to expose.

The place of meeting was two miles beyond the Gladden farm, and Leo knew that he would have ample opportunity for pressing his suit while riding to and from the grounds.

He bared his heated brow to the cool evening breeze, and rode briskly on, little dreaming of what the Fates had in store for him that night.

His mare halted so abruptly that he was nearly pitched over her head, as two dark figures leaped into the dimly seen road before him.

"Hold up your han's! draw a weep on an' you're a gone sucker!" cried a shrill, evidently disguised voice.

There was not a drop of cowardly blood in Leo Friend's veins, but a cold thrill crept over him at this summons. For nearly a year past Jackson county had been ravaged by a gang of outlaws who successfully defied all attempts to put them down. Horse-stealing and highway robberies were of almost every day occurrence, and more than one brutal murder had sent a thrill of horror through the State. Even the bravest men lowered their voices when speaking of the Crimson Clan. Their spies seemed ubiquitous, and every threat or disparaging speech was certain, soon or later, to be repented in loss of property or personal injury.

Leo was armed, as was the universal custom, forty years ago, west of the Great River, but he could see that he was covered by at least two rifles, the contents of which would be through him ere he could draw a weapon. Yet nothing was further from his thoughts than tame submission. He knew that a single touch of his spur would send his mare forward, hurling the two fellows aside like straws, and the friendly gloom beneath the arching timber would cover him ere they could use their weapons.

But that silent signal was never given. A pliant, well-greased rope shot from the bushes behind, and a noose settled fairly over the young man's head ere he realized his peril. A vigorous pluck followed, and Leo was jerked back so his shoulders touched the haunches of his mare.

"In an take his barkers, boys, while I hold him fast," cried a deep-toned voice from the undergrowth.

But Leo did not tamely submit, though taken at such a fearful disadvantage. Slipping his feet from the stirrups, he threw himself over backward, alighting fairly upon his feet in the middle of the road. With one hand he drew a pistol, while he sought to fling off the lasso with the other; but in vain.

His captor quickly recovered from his surprise at this unexpected movement, and shortening his grasp upon the rope, jerked Leo to the ground.

Like wildcats the two men leaped upon the youth, and despite his struggles, disarmed and bound his hands behind his back.

"So fur, good enough!" grunted one of the fellows, with an oath. "But ef ever I go out man-huntin' fer gal ag'in, you kin call me a double-dyed fool, an' I'll never kick!"

"I'd give a pickayune to hear ye talk that-a-way afore her!" chuckled his mate, grimly humorous.

"Cut it short, there!" muttered the man with the lasso, coming forward with the mare, which he had captured much as he had the master. "Don't you see the fellow is listening? If he spots you, he'll make things lively when he once gets loose again. Up with him. There's no time to waste."

With a mighty heave the young man was lifted into the saddle, and there secured by a couple of turns of the lariat around his ankles. Leading the horse by the halter, one of the men struck into the timber, bearing to the north. The other two fellows had disappeared from view, but, as Leo soon discovered, they were within earshot.

"Where are you taking me, and what for?" he asked, in a voice that betrayed little of the anxiety which he really felt. "You'll not make much; I haven't a dollar with me."

A low whistle blended with the last words, and the horse was led in the direction from whence the signal proceeded. The tall man who appeared to be the leader of the kidnappers, stepped from out the gloom, and tossing a heavy sack-coat over the prisoner's head, tied the two sleeves firmly behind Leo's neck.

"That's a hint for you to hold your tongue," he said, in a deep, rumbling tone. "You will know it all, quite soon enough. Hold your peace until leave is given you to speak, or you will be treated still more unceremoniously."

Utterly helpless, Leo could merely submit. If his tongue was still, his brains were not idle. Yet the whole affair was a baffling puzzle. He had recognized none of the three men, nor were their voices familiar to him. Their object could scarcely be robbery, since they had not even searched his person.

He strove to fix their course in his mind, but ere long he became utterly confused by the many turns and zig-zags made by his conductor. And an hour later, when there came a

halt and he was lifted from the saddle, he was completely at sea.

"Step high—you are about to enter the enchanted castle," muttered his conductor.

Leo obeyed, and the next moment he heard a door close behind him. The change of atmosphere told him that he had entered some kind of building. A moment later his arm was released and he was left standing alone, still blinded, his hands still bound. Something brushed quickly past him, and then he heard a door close, and a key turned in its lock.

After this all was still, yet he felt that he was not alone. The warm air was filled with a peculiar, intoxicating perfume. He could almost fancy that the mocking words of his late guide were true—that he was indeed in an enchanted castle.

A cold blade glided between his wrists, and the severed thongs dropped to the floor. With a quick gesture he tore the muffings from his head, and glanced swiftly around him.

He was standing in the center of a small room, the like of which his eyes had never seen. He seemed surrounded by a sea of blood. The walls, floor and ceiling were of deep crimson; so were the coverings of the few articles of furniture, even to the valance of the bed in the corner. All was the color of blood save one spot—and Leo Friend started back with a cry of wondering awe. A rarely beautiful face, framed in a mass of glossy, jet-black curls, seemed suspended in the air before him. The red lips parted in a bewitching smile, two little hands suddenly appeared, and, growing accustomed to the peculiar light, Leo now distinguished a fairy-like form, robed in crimson the same in hue as the hangings.

"Am I so hideous, then, that you shrink away as though from a poisonous serpent?"

The voice was soft and musical, but it grated harshly upon the young man's hearing, just then.

"It is you—Miss Foster!" he exclaimed.

"It used to be Mattie—but never mind. I will not reproach you. The return of the prodigal son was welcomed, not with reproaches—"

"He came willingly, while I—"

"Was abducted—exactly," and the young woman sunk into an easy-chair, with a low, bubbling laugh. "The less credit to your politeness. You have had invitations enough, I am sure. You refused them all, but being a woman, I was resolved to have my own way, hence your visit here. Please be seated."

"No, I am going. You have already made me break my engagement—"

"Then a few moments more cannot make much difference. Besides, you cannot leave me without my consent. The door is locked—the key is here," and laughing again, she half-drew the key from her swelling bosom.

"A door can be opened without a key, though I hope you will not force me to use violence."

"The door must be found, first—and that would not be so easy in this case. You must hear me, Leo Friend! Tell me—why do you shun me? Am I poison? Am I such a hideous hag?"

"Open the door and let me go. It will be better for us both. There can come no good from opening old wounds. But if you persist—"

"What then?" and the lithe figure was drawn erect, while the large black eyes shone with growing passion.

"Then you may hear sundry unpalatable truths."

"You cannot say more than you did that day, when—"

"When you did me the honor to offer me your hand and heart," coldly interposed the young man.

"I was mad—I did not know what I was saying. You said that you would forget—" murmured the girl.

"And I meant it. But since you have brought me here, in such a manner, what am I to think?"

"That I am mad—mad with love for you. That I would rather hear curses and reproaches from your lips, than vows of purest love from any other man. I have striven—ah! so hard! to tear your image from my heart—but in vain. While I draw the breath of life I will love you—while my heart beats, it will beat for you and you alone."

"Will you give me the key—or open the door? Believe me, it will be the wisest course."

"Are you a block—a stone? Are your veins filled with ice instead of human blood? I tell you that I love you, and you—My God! if I could only die!"

With a bitter sob, she sunk to the floor and buried her face in her hands. Leo made a step forward as though to lift her up, but then fell back once more.

The soft fall of his foot aroused her, and her face lifted with an eager light, but the cold rigidity of his countenance told how vain and fleeting was her sudden hope. With an angry gesture she flung back her glossy curls and arose.

"So! you fear even to touch me—now! The time was when you were not so fastidious. Then you were not afraid of soiling your hands—or your lips."

"Because—but never mind. Give me the key."

"Why not say it? That I made all the advances—that I kissed you first. It is true, I am not ashamed to acknowledge it. I loved you then—I love you now; living or dead, I will love you. You cannot deny me that."

"I deny you nothing that is in my power to give. But—to speak frankly—I do not love you as you wish."

"You would, had she—that baby-faced Belle Gladden—not come between us," flashed the little spitfire.

"That is barely possible. I am not ashamed to own that I love her, and mean to marry her, if she will have me," proudly responded Leo.

"She shall never be your wife—I swear it! There will be a funeral rather than a wedding."

"My hand can keep my head," laughed the young man.

"Not that—your life is sacred to me. But, as heaven hears me, Belle Gladden shall never wed you, though I have to slay her with my own hand."

"That is enough, and more than enough. I will listen to no more. Give me that key, or I will take it. If I must use force, blame yourself."

"There is no hope?" slowly uttered the woman, drawing close to him, an imploring light in her lustrous eyes.

"Must I repeat it once more?"

"No—I can see the truth in your eyes. I will trouble you no more. You are free. I only ask—bah! I am a fool. There would be no soul in your kisses, for me. Instead, pledge me in this," and she poured out a glass of wine. "Wish that I may forget—and you forgive."

Leo gazed at her, with a half smile. She read his doubt, and with a proud smile drained the glass. Then she refilled the glass, and held it to his lips. Ashamed to hesitate, after her example, Leo drank the liquor.

With a mocking laugh, Mattie sunk into a chair.

"If you will not live with me, you shall die with me!" she uttered in a voice that sounded faint and far away to his ears.

His brain grew dizzy, his legs began to give way. He staggered back and fell against the bed. As through a blood-red mist, he saw the woman arise and draw near. He felt her soft hands wind around his neck—her hot lips pressed to his—then sense and consciousness left him.

CHAPTER III.

HOW THE MIRACLE ENDED.

As though in answer to his impious appeal, a dark mass fell from the tree above, alighting fairly upon the shoulders of Joseph Smith, crushing him to the floor of the rostrum.

A thrill of superstitious horror pervaded the assembly, and for the moment even the most devout believers in Mormonism as a religion began to doubt the truth of their apostle's preaching. Surely the disfavor of Heaven was shown in the downfall of the prophet.

For an instant all was still; the congregation were dumfounded. But this was of short duration.

The two acolytes sprung to the aid of their fallen superior, and grasping the form which had crushed Joseph Smith beneath its weight, flung it bodily from the platform. Thus relieved, the Prophet arose, insane with pain and mortification. A storm of curses sprung from his lips. For the time being he was little better than a raging maniac.

His two assistants flung their arms around his body and forcibly restrained him, when he would have leaped to the ground after the being whose sudden descent from the overhanging bough had covered him with disgrace and ridicule.

The moment of superstitious feeling passed by, and the wildest excitement took possession of the crowd. Those who had attended in the expectation of a frolic, but who had, despite their skepticism, fallen under the rude but fiery eloquence of the exhorter, now made ample amends for their involuntary apostasy.

Yells of derision, taunting words and hoots, cheers of encouragement for the involuntary messenger from the upper realms, were mingled with threats against the unlucky disturber of the meeting. There, too, might be heard the screams of women and girls, terrified by the wild clamor about them, but their piteous appeals were unheeded save by their immediate protectors.

With each passing moment the excitement grew more and more intense. The cries grew louder and more distinct. The more fanatical believers in the new creed gained courage as they instinctively drew together, and from their midst uprose a terrible sound—the cry for blood!

It was never known who first uttered the word, but in an instant the cry was caught up by a full score of lusty throats, and the mischief was done.

Less than one minute had elapsed since the heedless wretch fell from his perch in the huge old tree. He lay as he had fallen when flung from the platform, seemingly stunned, if not disabled. Those nearest the stand had fallen

back in superstitious awe, and left him a clear space for a dozen square yards.

The double fall had not injured him, though he lay apparently so helpless. His little eyes were swiftly roving, his ears caught every word, his brain was at work. The action was strongly characteristic of the man. He was wolf, fox and 'possum combined. He was ready to fight for his life, if the occasion arose, and equally ready to play the role of unlucky sufferer through curiosity.

The yell of vengeance was raised, but the Mormons were not to have matters all their own way. High above the tumult rung the strange voice which had created such a disturbance a few minutes previous.

"Glory to the man who brought shame upon the false Prophet! Give him fair play, and down with the wolves!"

"Howgh—owgh—owgh—gh!"

Swiftly following the hidden voice came a shrill, prolonged yell—the war-whoop of the fierce Cheyenne!

As by magic all other sounds were stilled. Bronzed cheeks grew pale and wild eyes glanced apprehensively around as though in expectation of beholding the grim red-skin rushing to the carnival of death.

Again that thrilling yell resounded through the night, but now all could see that the cry issued from the lips of a gigantic white man whose garb of skin and furs was well suited to the sounds he uttered.

A dozen answering yells were raised, and as many rough-clad fellows were seen crowding their way toward him.

"No weapons, boys," cried the giant. "Stick to bone and muscle unless the critters pull on us fast. Now you p'izen critters! pile twenty on one, will ye? Wade in, ye heathen! Let's see which is boss—white men or Mormon whelps! Whoop-ee! It's old Sweet William's a-talkin' now! Don't ye hear my bugle callin' ye to glory forever amen!"

The challenge was promptly accepted. A chorus of shouts, a heavy surge, and then the rival parties were mingled together in a hand-to-hand struggle.

Only the weapons of nature were brought into use, as yet, but this could not last long. Passion grows with what it feeds upon, and it is not in human nature to submit to defeat, when weapons are within his reach by which the tide may be turned.

Those who had women and children under their charge, foresaw the probable result, and increased the confusion by striving to clear the *melee*.

One of the most unconcerned spectators, thus far, was the young man upon the long-horned Texan steer, but now, he too, was drawn into the vortex. A veritable devil apparently took possession of the horned animal. With a loud bellow, he plunged forward, kicking and striking with his fore-feet, tossing his long horns around in the most wonderful manner, scattering the struggling crowd like leaves before a whirlwind.

The quaint-looking rider, yelling with terror, clung frantically to the animal's neck, mingling prayers and curses most impartially; but the bellowing creature was deaf to his loud commands, and seemed resolved to have his full share of the sport.

Flourishing his magnificent horns, the four-legged peacemaker plunged here and there, and wherever he turned, fighting ceased and the men fled with yells of amused terror. And now the ragged rider forgot his affright in the ludicrous scramble, and rising erect, he tore the flaming turban from his head and swung it aloft with an exultant yell.

It was pride going before a fall! His charger stopped short, his head went down, his heels up, and Simon Singleton shot through the air like a mammoth frog clad in rags!

The man who had been the prime cause of all this uproar and confusion still lay as he fell, and the hot breath of the excited animal puffed full upon his brow. Another leap forward, and the sharp hoofs would crush him. But that was not upon the programme. With a curious twist and motion of his supple limbs, the fellow whirled half around the steer, and then, with a cat-like bound, he bestrode the animal.

With a hoarse bellow, the beast squatted low to the ground, then sprang aloft, shaking his lean carcass until one could almost hear the bones rattle in his skin. But as well strive to shake the huge horns from off his brow, as to unseat his strange rider.

A keen knife tickled his haunches, and with an indignant snort, the creature plunged madly forward, clearing the crowd and racing down the moon-lighted road with a speed that was fairly marvelous.

Simon recovered from his unceremonious tumble quite as quickly as a cat could, under the same circumstances, but not in time to prevent the abduction of his horned charger. For a moment he stared in open-mouthed astonishment, but then thrust two fingers into his mouth and gave vent to a whistle as sharp and piercing as though emitted by a steam engine.

The Texan steer was racing at full speed, but as the signal met his ear, he stopped as abruptly

as though stricken with a thunderbolt. Not so with the rider. Expecting nothing of the kind, he was caught off his guard, and continued his flight for twenty feet before touching the ground, whirling end over end. Luckily for himself he struck upon his feet, rebounding as though his limbs were composed of india-rubber, and plunging head-foremost into the undergrowth which thickly lined the road, he disappeared from all mortal eyes for that night.

As the fellow was dismounted, a simultaneous rush was made toward the spot by three-fourths of the crowd, but, though the search lasted for some minutes, it was fruitless. The game had vanished, leaving no trace behind him. Many were the questions asked, but no one could, or would, answer them satisfactorily.

"They's one critter kin tell," at length volunteered the big fellow who had called himself Sweet William. "That's Joe Smith—an' I move we make him 'fess. He's tried to put a dirty trick onto us fer a ginewine miracle, an' 'tain't no more'n right he should own up who all it was helped him."

These words were like a firebrand flung into a warehouse filled with tow. There was an instant division of the crowd. Those who sympathized with the Mormon apostle, drew close together and hastened back to the tree, resolved to shield their leader with their lives, if needs be.

No less resolved, the other faction followed the lead of Sweet William and his squad of mountain men. As yet no weapons were drawn, but all knew that any attempt to carry out Sweet William's threat against Joseph Smith, would result in a fight to the death.

For months the hatred between the two parties had been deepening, and the outbreak was only a question of time. But that time was not yet. Joseph Smith had been taken from the ground by his friends, and so the threatened conflict was confined to words.

Suddenly attention was directed to a small party slowly moving along the road, toward the congregation. Three men were bearing a body between them; a corpse, with white face and blood-saturated breast.

Not a word was spoken in response to the eager questions of the crowd, until the lifeless clay was gently placed beside one of the fires, where the red rays fell full upon his ashen countenance. Then one of the bearers bared his head and uplifting his hand, spoke:

"There has bin bloody murder done on one o' our friends an' fellow-citizens. I ax fer vengeance, an' I call on the Vigilance Committee to jine me in the work ontel jestic is done."

For a few moments there was perfect silence, the men gazing at each other as though awe-stricken. Then, from whence he came, none save himself could tell, but as by magic a tall figure clothed from head to foot in black, a heavy cowl drawn over his head, his eyes gleaming through two eyelets, glided to the side of the corpse. His voice, deep and solemn, seemed purposely disguised.

"Murder has been done, and vengeance called for in the name of the Vigilance Committee. We are bound by solemn oath to listen to and investigate every appeal to our authority. There may be some of the brethren present, but until they are in uniform, they cannot be recognized. Let the gathering disperse. Go straight to your homes, all who do not belong to the order. You can trust this matter in our hands."

Not a word was said in response. The Vigilantes of Missouri were both feared and respected, none the less because of the mystery which enshrouded them. It was said that the members did not know each other; most assuredly no outsider ever learned of whom they were composed.

In silence the crowd faded away, without making any attempt to learn who were about to remain. Such curiosity would be dangerous, as the past had proven.

One by one black shrouded figures stole silently into the firelight. Tall and stately, the chief stood beside the corpse, and each member paused beside him to deliver the proof of their membership. When all were assembled, the body was lifted, and the gloomy forest swallowed up living and dead.

CHAPTER IV.

THE BACKWOODS BELLE.

THE rising sun was just tipping the wood-crowned hill-top with its round, good-humored face, when the form of a human being, which had been lying as silent and as motionless as any of the surrounding boulders, suddenly started into life and motion. With a low whimper of delight a young mare snapped its tether and bounded to his side; but its fond mumblings were unheeded. One vacant stare into the large, lustrous, almost speaking eyes was all, then the young man staggered to his feet and stared around him with a bewildered air, one hand pressed to his painfully throbbing temples.

"Am I drunk—or crazy?" he muttered, unconsciously speaking aloud. "It is broad day—there is no house here—*she* lives ten miles from here. I must have been dreaming!"

But even as he spoke he knew that this was not the truth, not all the truth. That dizzy,

intoxicating whirl had not yet left his brain, the subtle perfume still lingered in his nostrils, and upon his lips he could still feel those hot, passionate kisses—the seal of the deathlike trance from which he had just awakened.

A cold shudder crept through Leo Friend's veins, as he remembered. There was a smack of diabolism throughout the whole affair, and which corresponded well with the rumors which were gaining ground among the settlers, and some of which gave old Hark Foster and his daughter Martha credit of being close allies to Satan himself.

"Bah! I'm a fool to believe such things—I'll go and wring the truth from the old man's lips if she will not speak," muttered Leo, springing into the saddle, and riding down the slope.

But ere he reached the road he had time for thought, and instead of striking out for Hark Foster's cabin, he turned his mare's head toward the farm of Anderson Gladden, riding with a free spur, nor drawing rein until he reached the vine-embowered log cabin, the humble casement which sheltered his heart's jewel.

Leo sprang to the ground, an eager light in his eye, for just entering the spring-house, he caught a glimpse of Belle Gladden. Leaving his mare to care for herself, which she did by leaping the barred gate and paying her attentions to the fodder-rack, Leo hastened at once to the spring-house eager to make his peace with his love.

A small, low, moss-grown shanty, covering a sparkling spring and devoted to keeping milk and butter fresh and cool, the rude structure now contained a jewel of price. Leo paused before the half-opened door, feeding his love through his eyes.

Though neither tall, stately nor handsome, Belle Gladden was lovely in the truest sense of the word. She was not an angel, but a true, pure-hearted woman. Her rich brown hair was a little rumpled; there was a plash of cream upon her smooth pink cheek; a rent in her calico dress, and her feet were bare. Her white forehead was just a trifle wrinkled, and her red-ripe lip was pouting. Right well Leo knew the cause of this, and a faint smile dawned upon his face as he stepped forward with extended hand.

"No, sir!" said Belle, as she turned at the sound, put both hands behind her, while the petulant pout was aggravated. "I'll not shake hands until you explain why I had to ride to the meeting alone, last night. I suppose you forgot all about the engagement."

"You know I did not," he hastily replied. "I started in good time, but—"

"You could not pass Tom Keywood's. Your bloodshot eyes betray you. And yet—you promised me so faithfully that you would never drink again!"

"And I have kept my word. I did not stop at Keywood's, nor did I drink a drop—that is, no more than a single swallow of wine," correcting himself, with a hot flush, as he remembered the fatal draught held to his lips by the crimson-clad siren of the past night.

"And that one swallow made you forget your engagement? I feel most highly honored!"

"You are harder on me than I deserve," said Leo, speaking with forced calmness. "I came to apologize, to explain why I failed to keep my appointment. The story would be hard enough to tell, even without your mocking me. Will you listen to me quietly, or shall I choose another time?"

For an instant their eyes met, but that was enough. In his Belle read a deep sea of trouble, and knew that the matter was far more serious than she had fancied. The pettish coquetry had vanished.

"Not here. Come into the house. Father is away, and there will be no one to interrupt you."

In silence Leo followed the maiden into the west end of the double log-cabin. Belle placed a chair for him; then sat down opposite, her eyes fixed inquiringly upon his.

It was indeed a hard story to tell; hard to begin, still harder to continue, while those big black eyes were gazing so steadily into his.

"They took me prisoner, when I was hastening to keep my appointment with you. They blindfolded me, and made so many turns and bends that I could not keep our bearings. They took me to a house; it could not have been Hark Foster's, though she was there—"

"You mean Martha Foster?"

"Yes," and Leo's color deepened at the slow, cold tone in which Belle spoke these words.

With quickened speech he continued his recital, softening the passionate words and actions of the girl-wooer as much as he could without rendering his story incoherent and incomplete. But with every word he saw his heart's love grow colder; her color faded, her eyes shone with a hard, icy light that fairly chilled him. He could no longer encounter that piercing gaze, and his eyes sought the floor. But he did not break off speaking. With a dogged resolution he persisted until the end.

"I threatened to use force—to break down the door, if she would not suffer me to go in peace. She yielded, but only on condition that I would pledge her forgiveness in a glass of

wine. I did so, as the shortest mode of getting out of a painful situation. The moment I swallowed the liquor, my blood seemed turned to ice. I know now that the wine was drugged; I thought, then, that it was poison. Indeed, the last words I remember hearing her speak were that since I would not live for her, we would die together. This, then I seemed to fall heavily; I can recall nothing more."

"You passed the night there, then?"

"I do not know. All after what I have told, was a blank."

"But when you returned to consciousness?"

"I was lying upon the ground, near the top of Bald Hill. My mare was tied close by. No other living being was in sight. I know not how I came there."

"A strange story," murmured Belle, her eyes cast down, thoughtfully.

"Strange, but true. If I have spoken one word which is false—"

A low, mocking laugh came to their ears, and as they started to their feet, a slender, neatly dressed man stepped across the threshold. Slight built, yet lithe and supple as the panther, with sinews of tempered steel, with a heart that knew no fear, with a face as handsome as that of an archangel; such was Gerald Evans, one of Joseph Smith's right-hand men, and one of his assistants in the "miracle" of the past night.

"A very romantic story, and one which I am exceedingly loth to spoil," he uttered, in a low, musical tone, the white teeth gleaming beneath his drooping mustache. "But truth is truth, and last night was spent by Mr. Friend in the saddle, a crimson mask over his face—"

"What do you mean, Gerald Evans?"

"I mean that the mask is torn from your face at last. That you are the chief of the Crimson Clan—that you are Captain Moonlight, the robber—thief—ay! and the murderer! That your hand is even now wet with the blood of your last victim—"

Thus far spoke Gerald Evans, but no further. With a low, snarling oath, Leo Friend leaped forward and launching out his right arm, knocked the Mormon proselyte headlong through the open door, where he lay upon the sward, quivering like an ox that has been felled by the ax of the butcher.

Half mad, Friend would have followed to inflict fresh punishment, but as his foot touched the threshold, he felt, rather than saw that his life was in danger, that his heart was covered by a cocked rifle.

Swift as thought he sprung back, none too soon. A sharp report, and a bullet tore its way through the bosom of his shirt, fairly breaking the skin in its passage, and ere the peculiar numbing sensation left him, Leo saw that the doorway was filled by three men.

Dashing the mist from before his eyes, he drew his pistol and was about to dash forward, only realizing that his life was in peril, when Belle stepped between, with extended arms, crying:

"Stop! what does this mean? Father—"

"It means that this young man must consider himself under arrest," promptly responded the man addressed; none other than the giant who so good-naturedly cautioned Simple Simor at the meeting, the night before. "Go to your own room, gal. This is no place for such as you."

"Arrest—for what, Anderson Gladden?" cried Leo, lowering his weapon as though recognizing a friend.

"For murder!" hissed Evans, endeavoring to enter the room by passing beneath Gladden's arm. "I am ordered to arrest you—I have my warrant here—and arrest you I will, dead or alive!"

"Dead, then—I'll never be disgraced by your foul touch while I breathe!" cried Leo, his eyes aglow.

"You only make things wuss, fr'nd," said Gladden, as he coolly swung the raging Mormon outside.

"You take things easy; I 'low to run this 'fair, long's it's in my own house. Now, Leo, don't be a fool. You've got to go. Act sensible, an' we'll make it as easy fer ye as we kin. Surrender—"

"Come and take me—if you can! Two men will die, first!" grated the young man, almost beside himself.

With a short laugh the giant moved forward, nor did he touch a weapon, though the pistol held by the maddened youth was staring him full in the face. Two steps—then the pistol flashed. But the bullet spent its force upon the log wall, as Belle thrust the muzzle aside.

A brief struggle followed, then Leo Friend stood disarmed, a captive bound.

"God forgive you, Belle!" he cried, as they led him away. "You have delivered me over to death!"

With a heart-breaking sob she sank to the floor, burying her face in her hands, those cruel words ringing in her ears.

CHAPTER V.

TRIED FOR HIS LIFE.

THERE is usually little time cut to waste when Judge Lynch presides over a court of justice, nor was the trial of Leo Friend an exception.

The moment the charge of murder was made and the details clearly understood, the chief of the Vigilance Committee gave orders for his men to disperse, nor cease hunting until the accused was captured.

Though not a member of the band, no man was busier than Gerald Evans. He, by means best known to himself, procured a warrant from the one squire of the little village, and with two men, soon ran his game to earth. In all probability there would have been no need of a formal trial, had not Anderson Gladden joined the man-hunters as they neared his cabin. Through his nerve Leo was taken prisoner, nor did he relinquish his charge until before the hastily convened court of Judge Lynch.

In some respects the scene was a peculiar one. The Vigilance Committee had reassembled, and as the most commodious place for holding their court, had selected the raised platform which the settlers had erected for the dance which was to terminate the day's festivities. One advantage was that the court could easily be kept free from the too close intrusion of outsiders.

The Vigilantes still wore their black hoods and shapeless gowns. Who and what they were, none save themselves knew.

Two of these somber-cowled beings held Leo Friend firmly pinioned by the arms. His brain was clear, now. He knew that his life was in danger, even though there was no truth in the accusation. Captain Moonlight and his Crimson Clan had played too prominent a part in the affairs of the past month for even the faintest chance of bringing him to justice to be thrown away.

The chief of the Vigilantes took his seat behind an empty barrel, which had been up-ended to serve as a desk. In a deep, resounding voice which was rendered hollow by the muffling cowl, he uttered six different numbers, reading from a scrap of paper in his hand.

Without a word, as many of the black-cowled figures moved forward and sunk down upon a bench to the right of the judge's position. The latter arose, and amid the deepest attention, addressed the prisoner:

"Leo Friend, you are brought before us, charged with a crime which merits death. If this charge be sustained, God have mercy upon your soul!"

"Of what am I charged?" impetuously cried the prisoner, vainly striving to shake off the vise-like grasp upon his arms. "The man who charges me with crime is a liar, and I will—"

"Peace!" came the deep, solemn voice. "If you are innocent, you have nothing to fear. You shall have justice, pure and simple. To prove our wish to afford you every chance, we allow you this privilege. Yonder sit six jurymen, chosen by lot from our body. You can add the other six, either from our order, or from the spectators yonder. Take your choice."

"Giving you all the thanks such a courtesy deserves, I'll make my selection among those who do not fear to have the sun shine on their bare faces," promptly responded Leo, with a mocking bow to the judge.

"All right, boss!" sounded a mighty voice, and the giant trapper who had led the charge against the Mormons, leaped over the railing and stood before the prisoner. "Yar I be—old Sweet William, ready fer to fight or arg'e the case from now till the cows come home. I knowed ye wouldn't skip over me—not much!"

"Is this man one of your choice?" demanded the judge.

Leo hesitated for a moment, but then the glittering eye of the grizzled giant met his gaze, and the expression therein could not be mistaken. He felt that a friend had come to his aid, and though unknown, knew that he could be trusted.

"He is; and Anderson Gladden is my second choice," replied Leo; and then he named the remaining jurors, but who have no further connection with this story.

The judge arose and swore in the jury. Then he addressed them briefly, pointing out the duty which was expected of them in terms too plain to be mistaken.

Leo felt his heart grow lighter with each passing moment, for he saw that it was intended that he should have a fair and impartial trial. The proceedings were far more deliberate than the generality of lynch-law courts, and he had lived long enough upon the border to know that few men were lynched in cold blood, or after the first fierce outburst was passed.

"John Hopper!"

In response to the deep call, a squat, heavy-built man stood forward, uncovering his shock head, and shifting uneasily from foot to foot.

"Sw'ar him, jedge!" rumbled big Sweet William, "or we won't b'lieve a blamed word he says. A feller jest like his twin brother used to make a livin' stealin' honest men's traps—"

"Silence!" sternly cried the judge. "You are to hear, not talk."

"Ef I say any other word, jedge, you kin button my lips up with a 'spender buckle," nodded Sweet William.

The witness was duly sworn, and cautioned to tell a straightforward story, without comments or irrelevant remarks.

"Me 'nd Jake Ramsel was comin' to the meetin', last night," began the witness, speaking rapidly and in a dogged tone that unfavorably impressed many of his hearers. "We come by Tom Keywood's, an' sorter dropped in thar fer to get a drink. We didn't stop no very great time—jest long enough to play a couple or three games o' seven-up 'long o' Tom, which he was kinder lonesome, owin' to the meetin' takin' away most o' the boy's as uses thar—"

"Keep to your story," sharply interposed the judge.

"I wanted to show why we was so late," muttered the witness, shifting uneasily from one foot to the other. "We come 'long to the holler whar Turkey Crick crosses the road, when Jake he pulled up an' cocked his year like he hearn somethin' out o' the common run—"

"A sorter groan, like, jedge; sounded like somebody hed the cramp powerful bad," came a voice from the crowd.

"Jest so," hurriedly added Hopper, before the judge could speak. "An' when we followed up the sound we found the dead man, which he was alive then, all kivered with blood an' bresh piled atop him, which we pulled away an' then found it was Don Larkin, the drover."

"We give him a taste o' whisky, an' axed him who did it, an' he said—"

"Remember, you are on your oath!" cried Leo.

"So much the wuss fer you," snapped the witness, casting a sidelong glance in that direction. Don picked up enough to tell us all about it. 'Pears like he'd made a big sale o' cattle and hoss critters, which he was comin' home with the money, when three men rid out at him. Don wasn't a man to dodge a fight, even ef they wasn't money in it, an' he lent the fust feller a clip that tumbled him eend over eend. Afore he could do any more t'others knocked him off his critter, but he clinched one an' they hed it hot an' heavy. 'Don made a grab an' off comes the red cloth in his han'. The moon was bright enough, as you all know, an' Don, jest afore he died, swore by his mother's grave that the man whose face he unknivered was the pris'ner, yonder, Leo Friend."

As he spoke the witness turned and pointed his finger at the accused. A low murmur ran through the crowd, but a motion of the judge's hand restored quiet.

"Go on, witness. Finish your statement."

"They ain't much more to tell. Don said that when he made this diskivery that it knocked him all of a heap like, 'twas so unexpected. An' afore he knowed the pris'ner broke loose, drew a pistol an' shot him clean through. He fell back like he was dead, but he could still hear 'em talkin', an' one o' the other men called the fust one Cap'n Moonlight, an' axed him what would they do with the car'on. They talked some over it, then went through his pockets an' rolled him down the holler an' kivered him over with bresh."

"That's the story, an' if it ain't the hull truth then I don't know what the truth is."

"One word. What time of the night was this?" demanded Leo Friend.

"Nigh as I could tell, 'bout ten o'clock. Don said he'd bin thar the biggest part of a hour."

"That will do. I have nothing more to say. Only let the jury remember that this alleged murder occurred about nine o'clock in the evening."

Jake Ramsel was summoned, but it is unnecessary to reproduce his evidence here since it was but a repetition of the other. He was allowed to stand aside without being cross-examined.

On being asked what witness he could call, Leo asked permission to tell his own story. This was granted him, and he gave a brief but clear account of what had occurred to him upon the past evening. The account of his capture and blindfolded ride was listened to in silence, but when he spoke of his reception by Martha Foster there was a sensation.

A small, wiry-built man sprung upon the platform, with drawn knife and hissing curses. Only for the prompt action of Sweet William Leo's speech would have been cut short by the hand of death. Even as it was the giant trapper could not disarm the madman unaided.

"Let up, — you!" he snarled, breathlessly. "He lied 'bout my da'ter—I'll hev his heart's blood —"

"You'll hev a sore head, unless you quit your owdacious cavortin'," grunted Sweet William, lifting his antagonist clear off the floor, then carrying him to the edge and dropping him over the railing.

At a sign from the judge, several of the Vigilantes closed in about Hark Foster and kept him quiet throughout the remainder of the trial.

Leo proceeded with his statement, omitting nothing which is known to the reader, and confessing his inability to explain what had transpired during his insensibility, or how he was conveyed to the summit of Bald Hill, where he awoke to consciousness.

"A very remarkable story," observed the judge, arising. "Did you not recognize either of the men who effected your capture?"

"No, sir. It was quite dark beneath the

trees, and they gave me little time to recover from my surprise."

"Well, the jury must decide. Have you anything else to offer? any other witness?"

"Yes!" cried Leo, his eyes fixed upon a horse and rider at that moment drawing near the stand. "There is my witness. I demand that Miss Martha Foster be sworn!"

CHAPTER VI.

AN UNWILLING WITNESS.

WITH not the faintest trace of the last night's passion upon her face, Martha Foster rode swiftly toward the pavilion. But the scene which met her gaze was so very different from the one her fancy had pictured; the platform crowded with solemn, black-shrouded figures, instead of gay, light-hearted dancers, that she drew rein with a low exclamation of wonder, not unmixed with uneasiness. She knew that her father's life trail did not always follow the straight course of honesty; since he passed the night away from home, might not this gathering be in his honor?

A rich, attractive picture she formed then, and more than one pulse in that crowd quickened as the words of the prisoner drew their attention in that direction. A vision of red and black and white.

The thick, clustering curls, blue-black, like the raven's wing, barely touched her shoulder. A dainty turban of crimson velvet, ornamented with a sable plume; a close-fitting basque waist of the same rich material, thickly studded with bell-shaped buttons of gold; a short, full skirt of black cloth; beneath, full Turkish trowsers of soft scarlet flannel; tiny boots, armed at the heel with tinkling spurs. A belt encircled the round, trim waist, supporting a brace of small but thoroughly reliable pistols and a long, slender knife.

The horse which bore this tropical vision, was a fitting accompaniment. Small of frame, but clean-limbed and finely muzzled, it was the model of a thoroughbred racer, on a reduced scale. White as the undrifted snow from crest to hoof, only the big, lustrous eyes, and the pink muzzle broke the semblance of a living, moving snowdrift.

The momentary pallor fled from the girl's cheek, and her keen gaze penetrated the circle of the black-robed figures. She could just catch a glimpse of the prisoner, but not enough to recognize him. Then a slight bustle to the right attracted her attention, and a change as swift as it was deadly came over her countenance, as she saw her father struggling vainly in the grasp of two black-robed figures.

A hissing sound passed her lips that might have been an imprecation, as the golden spur buried its teeth in the white hide, and the horse sprung forward as though hurled from a catapult. Just how it was managed, not one of the wondering spectators could have told, but an instant later Hark Foster was standing free and unharmed, while his two guards were sprawling upon the ground twenty feet away, bruised and discomfited.

A cocked pistol was in the fair spitfire's hand as she glanced wickedly around, and emphasized her words:

"The man who touches my father insults me, and you are already aware how I settle such debts. What has he done, an old man—"

"Come away, gal—don't stop to talk—they's trouble in the air. 'Le's git out o' it while we kin," muttered Hark Foster, pulling at the skirts of the enraged beauty.

"I demand that Miss Foster be placed upon the witness stand," cried Leo Friend in a clear, ringing voice. "There is a foul conspiracy against my life and honor, which she can baffle, if she will but tell what she knows."

"Run fer it, gal," eagerly muttered Hark. "I'll kiver you. Run fer it, I say, or them p'izen imps 'll hev a lynchin' bee, which we'll be the head mourners."

But his words fell upon an unheeding ear. Mattie was staring at the white face of the prisoner, as though spellbound. Only for a moment. Then strong and apparently conflicting emotions agitated her features. For an instant her face grew fairly repulsive, then settled into a cold, icy composure, as the judge arose and called upon her to come forward and state what she knew concerning the matter in question.

She cast one swift glance around, but if her thought was of flight, the idea was quickly given over. The two Vigilantes from whose grasp she had freed her father, had edged around behind her, and now stood with ready pistols. An attempt at escape would end in the death of her horse, and that was by far too costly a sacrifice.

With a word and a touch of the spur, the white horse rose into the air, clearing the railing and alighting upon the platform, performing the feat with a deer-like grace and adroitness. A low cheer came from the spectators, but silence was instantly restored as the fair Amazon began to speak, addressing the judge:

"Will you be kind enough to tell me why and for what I am summoned here?"

"To give evidence in this case of murder and highway robbery. The prisoner, who stands accused of this double crime, declares that you

can prove an *alibi* for him. Allow me to put the oath—"

"There is no need of so much ceremony for the little I can tell. I know nothing about either murder or robbery. You are simply wasting your time—"

"Of that you must allow us to judge. You may know nothing of the crime itself, yet know enough to save an innocent life. You can state whether the prisoner spent last night in your company—"

"He did not," snapped the fair horsewoman, with a fiery glance.

"Nor any portion of the night?"

"I will not answer—you have no right to insult me with such questions. Because I am only a girl, you think you can say or do what you please, but—"

"Miss Foster, allow me. At present you are a witness, neither a woman nor a girl. Upon your evidence in all probability hinges a human life. There is no choice. What you know you must speak, either of your own accord, or if must be, by compulsion. If you prefer, the court shall be cleared of all save those immediately interested; but speak you must and shall."

"Do you demand this?" and Martha turned abruptly toward Leo Friend. "Do you insist upon my speaking?"

"I do. It is the only chance of saving me from an unjust sentence," was his grave reply.

"Heaven pity you, then! Blame yourself, not me. I am ready to take the oath, sir mask."

The oath was delivered and subscribed to. Then, as the shortest method of getting at the whole matter, the judge directed the witness to relate all that could bear upon the events of the past night.

"Well, sir, though you have imposed upon me a most disagreeable task, I will do my duty without fear or favor—and at the same time give these good people with open ears a sweet morsel of scandal for the exercise of their charitable tongues."

"I am a woman, therefore a fool in some things. Last night I was doubly one, as you shall see. So much by way of preface."

"Mr. Friend, the prisoner, was one of my first acquaintances in these parts. He is handsome, has a nimble tongue, and well knows how to employ it. I am a woman, and naturally easily believed what I most wished for—to speak plainer, when Mr. Friend told me he loved me, I was fool enough to believe him, and told him as much. I suppose I was too easily won, for in less than two months I learned that he was keeping company with another girl—I need not mention names."

"Will Miss Foster please remember that she is upon her oath?" a little sharply interposed the prisoner.

"Do I not? Would I be publishing my own shame to the world if I had not sworn to tell the whole truth?"

"Is not this irrelevant?" asked the judge.

"No, sir; it is necessary to explain what follows," tartly replied Martha; then resuming: "Through a friend I learned that the prisoner had engaged to escort this lady to the Mormon meeting, and, woman-like, I resolved that she should be disappointed. And she was."

"Who were my assistants I will never tell. Enough that Mr. Friend was captured when he was on his way to keep his appointment, and conveyed blindfolded to where I was awaiting him. What passed between us there I leave for him to tell in detail. It was the old, old story. A woman's reproaches, a man's excuses. He did not tell me in so many words that I was a silly fool for believing his soft speeches, but his actions did. The scene grew painful, and so we parted."

"Nothing passed between you but words, then?"

"I am not sure that I understand you, sir. There was nothing more but what I have confessed, save that I gave him a glass of wine."

"And that wine was drugged?"

"No, sir; I drank first, and out of the same glass. The liquor was strong, nothing more."

"And you parted immediately after?"

"Within five minutes. The prisoner complained of dizziness, but that lasted only a moment. We shook hands, kissed and parted."

"As Heaven hears me!" solemnly uttered Leo, "I knew nothing more after drinking that liquor, until I awoke upon Bald Hill this morning after sunrise."

"That may be true," quietly responded Mattie. "I opened the door, you left the house, mounted your horse and rode away by the Turkey creek road."

"At what hour was this?" quickly demanded the judge.

"As near as I can tell, about half-past eight. I know this by the amount of work which I did before the clock struck nine."

Other questions were asked, but nothing new was elicited. There was no more evidence available, and when Mattie declared that, as the clock struck, she asked the maid-servant the hour, which was nine, there was nothing for it but to give the case to the jury.

After a few moments, consultation, the fore-

man stated that they wished time for deliberation. Under a guard, they were conducted to the little school-house, and locked in.

For nearly an hour all were kept in most painful suspense, and there was a general sigh of relief when the jury made their reappearance. But, as it proved, it was not to deliver the verdict. They requested that the maid servant alluded to by the last witness might be sent for.

As these words were heard, a man in the crowd gave a rapid signal to Hark Foster, who lost no time in acting upon it. Stealing to where his horse was hitched, he untied him and leaping into the saddle darted away at full speed.

Only one in the company seemed to divine his purpose.

"He's gone to run the sarvant gal off—shoot the boss!" thundered Sweet William, sending a hasty bullet after the fugitive, but in vain.

Though a dozen shots were fired, and half as many horsemen started in swift pursuit, Hark Foster disappeared, untouched, uncaught.

After a brief consultation, the judge remanded the prisoner to the log building which served as jail, to await the coming of the new witness, adding:

"If she says that it was nine o'clock, God have mercy upon your soul."

CHAPTER VII.

SPORTS AND PASTIMES.

UPON any ordinary occasion these rapidly succeeding events would have furnished ample food for brain and tongue for days to come, but not so now. The fires awakened by the "Glorious Fourth" burned far more vigorously than in these days. None were too old or feeble to join in the sports, or to add their quota to the general noise and confusion. Hence it was that, less than five minutes after the heavy slab door closed upon Leo Friend, his critical situation seemed forgotten, and the sports and pastimes of the hilarious crowd proceeded as merrily as though one of their friends and neighbors was not lying beneath the black shadows of a shameful death.

Gayest of the gay was old Sweet William, and wherever that giant figure strolled, there the fun and good-natured excitement waxed highest. Close at his heels glided that animated scarecrow, Simon Singleton, a broad grin upon his face, huge delight beaming from his staring eyes.

The grounds now presented an animated scene. Already the pavilion was occupied by dancers, and the clatter of cowhide boots began to drown the music which lent them inspiration. But this sport offered slight inducement to the jolly trapper, and with a sniff of disgust, he strolled on, pausing at every few steps to sample the liquor which flowed almost as free as water, and long before the rounds were completed, both Sweet William and his henchman began to show the effects of their generous potations. Ever and anon the giant would come to an abrupt pause, his head erect, his chest swelling like that of an amorous turkey-cock, his cheeks swelling until the pent upsteam found vent in a prolonged bellow that would have shamed a wounded buffalo. At first this was startling, but as nothing more serious followed, the crowd contented themselves with laughing at the ridiculous exhibition.

The effect of his liquor was very different upon Simple Simon. His loose joints grew looser until he seemed in danger of falling to pieces at every step; his head wagged from side to side, and his eyes were even more fishy than usual.

The sharp crack of a rifle drew the two toppers like a powerful magnet to that portion of the grounds where a target was arranged, the prizes being fresh slaughtered beef. Once commenced, the sport was not allowed to flag, and the enterprising manager was fairly coining money.

The target was the usual primitive one; a cross cut upon the broad bole of an oak tree, one hundred yards from the shooting stand.

"Ef ary man kin beat that, I want to clap my two eyes onto him!" cried the last marksman, when the result of his shot was announced. "Breakin' center on the top line—an' I reckon them hide an' taller's my meat!"

"A fa'r shot, an' better'n ef 'twas on a side line, but thar's room a-plenty fer a bullet to lay in atween yours an' the center," coolly observed Sweet William.

"Mebbe you kin putt a bullet thar?"

"Mebbe I could, but I don't shoot at anythin' under hafe a mile, long measure. But I've got a little boy which is jest a-l'arnin' to shoot, as I'll bet on, pervided he ain't too full o' bug-juice—how is it, sonny?" and the glant turned toward Simple Simon.

"I kin thread a needle twice't as fur, or shoot a 'skeeter on the wing!" murmured Simon, swaying to and fro, a vacuous smile upon his face.

As some who read these lines may be ignorant of this once popular Western amusement, a brief explanation will not come amiss.

A beef is offered—worth say twenty dollars, at twenty-five cents a shot. When the full amount is subscribed, the shooting begins. The target is an upright cross, the arms two inches

long. A bullet planted in the perpendicular line is better than one upon the horizontal arm, even if not so near the center, while one equally close, but between the arms, is regarded as a poor shot. The best shot takes hide and tallow; the second and third the hind-quarters; fourth and fifth the fore-quarters, while the sixth gets the lead which has been shot into the tree.

"Is that the boy you want to shoot ag'in me?" with a sniff of disgust. "I kin lick any man as tries to poke fun at me, ef he's bigger'n the side of a house! I'll shoot you or any other human critter; but a idgit—an' him three halves drunk! Come an' see me—"

"Put up or shet up—the boy kin shoot ye blind fer money. Beat him, then I'll low ye to whip me all ye kin spell able fer. Ef ye leave enough o' me in one piece, then I'll show yer how we shoot whar I was raised."

"They's one chaine left open, boss," interposed the manager. "A quarter buys it, an' then, ef the boy kin hit the tree, some o' these gen'lemen'll give him a try."

Sweet William paid the money, and motioned Simple Simon to take the stand. A low laugh ran around the gathering as they noticed the awkward manner in which the "innocent" handled his patched and tinkered rifle, and several, with clumsy jocosity, hastened to hide behind the nearest corner. But if Simon saw this, he gave no sign. His whole attention seemed divided between the distant target and the attempt to stand firmly on his feet. The long and heavy weapon wobbled in a most wonderful manner, and when it exploded, a derisive yell came from the amused spectators.

"Ef he teched the tree, I'll eat him, gun, rags an' all!" grinned the delighted marksman.

"Yar's my weasel skin, an' every dollar in it sais thar's a chunk o' lead chuck up in the middle o' that cross. You feller! don't call out that shot jist yet. Come an' see me, gen'lemen. Yar's your chaine to make your fortin or git bu'sted! An' two to one it's a bu'st!"

Some of the scoffers were silenced by this bold challenge, but there were enough who were only too ready to back their opinion, and Sweet William soon found the majority of his double eagles covered with a like amount.

"Gen'lemen, I'll give ye a chaine. Your money's lost, sure, but you kin hev it back ag'in ef the boy can't put three bullets through the same hole at the same distance, drunk as he is."

"Better settle this fust. I'm bettin' he didn't hit the tree."

"Which shows you don't know good shootin' when you see it. Look thar! Plum center, jist as I told ye!"

Such was the fact. Whether by skill or a lucky chance Simple Simon's bullet lay imbedded in the very center of the cross. Those who had nothing at stake applauded freely; the losers swallowed their mortification as best they might.

"The boy was drunk or he'd 'a' done better'n that. Why, gen'lemen, take him sober an' he kin outshoot me! I see him once; he throwed a musket ball up in the air an' kep' it up thar till sundown—he did so!" He hit it with his first shot an' knocked it up so high that he was ready loaded when it come down 'ithin range, an' kep' on that-a-way for two weeks at a stretch—"

"Ef the shootin' was long's your tongue he'd 'a' starved to death afore it eended," growled the defeated marksman.

"You boy—he's gone to look a'ter that race-hoss o' his'n but I'll give ye some idee of the way he kin shoot," and stooping, Sweet William picked up a small round pebble about the size of an egg, then cocking a long, double-barreled pistol, "Ef I don't splatter that, gen'lemen, I'll give ye yer money back."

As he concluded Sweet William tossed the pebble high into the air, and, as his weapon exploded, the stone flew sharply to one side. But, with a skill that was fairly marvelous, the giant followed its descent, and once more was heard the whistling of the flattened bullet.

"Tain't a fa'r specimen o' what he can do, gen'lemen," said Sweet William, coolly, as the wondering crowd inspected the scarred pebble. "He wouldn't 'a' let it tumble a-tall, but I'm kinder out o' practice."

"Ef he kin beat you, he's the devil sure enough, an' I'm goin' to skin out o' yere while I kin."

A laugh followed this half-serious remark, and even those who had lost their money gradually regained their good humor under the quaint sallies of the giant trapper as they passed from booth to booth, finally bringing up where a number of young fellows had been racing their horses. Prominent among the animals was a clean-limbed chestnut, whose points would have charmed a professional jockey. Both horse and rider were flushed with victory, but all the taunting banter of the fellow could not secure another match until Sweet William coolly observed:

"A fa'r-looking plug, an' mought git over a quarter in toler'ble time, but I've got a critter as kin double him up at twicet the distance."

"Not fer money," was the quick retort.

"Fer all you kin show. What you putt up I'll kiver; but you'd better save out enough to

git your bed an' lodgin' with—I speak as a fri'nd."

"You kiver that—never mind 'bout me. Now, whar is the critter you're goin' to run ag'in me?"

"He's a leetle bigger'n your hoss."

"Don't make no difference. Money's up, an' I'll run her for it if you fetch on a bullgine. Half a mile—round that blazed tree an' back here."

"You boy! fetch up Dilemmy!" shouted Sweet William, and in response Simple Simon pressed through the crowd, mounted upon the back of a huge-horned, bony Texan steer!

A yell of amusement greeted them, but Sweet William was undeniably in earnest.

"Money's up—an' yar's your bull without the gine. Yar's the critter kin give chain-lightin' ten foot the start an' beat it out a quarter. Bu'st or git bu'sted—an' I'm bettin' on Dilemmy. Whar's the gambolier? Who's the fust man what wants to make me rich? Ah, do come an' see me, gen'lemen! Ten dollars Dilemmy licks the horse critter—the muley cow fer rocks!"

But bets were hard to get, even with such odds in favor of the horse, for the recent lessons had not been forgotten, and many of those present regarded the strangely matched couple with something akin to superstition.

Had not the stakes been already posted, the young man would probably have declined to run, not through fear of defeat, but even should he win, he would be an object of ridicule. But Sweet William would listen to no compromise, and in a few moments had his horned champion to the starting-point.

The rules were simple. A blazed tree stood just a quarter of a mile distant, which the racers were to round, then return to the starting-point, the first one to complete the course to be adjudged the winner.

The chosen judge gave the word, and the two animals bounded away amid loud yells and peals of laughter.

For the first few moments, the horse drew ahead, running low and level like a true bred racer, but then Dilemma settled to his work as Simple Simon tickled his flanks, covering the ground with wonderfully long and rapid strides, regaining his distance inch by inch, and by the time one-half of the distance had been covered, his remarkable speed fairly justified the confidence expressed by Sweet William. The dust wrapped them in a cloud as the blazed tree was neared, nor could any tell which led until the turn was made. The horse wheeled first, but Dilemma was close at his heels, and they came thundering down the back-stretch.

It seemed anybody's race, until, like the trump of doom, a terrific bellow came from Dilemma, and the race was virtually over. The chestnut, terrified by the hot blast coming so close upon his haunches, went into the air, its rider lost his head, wrenching the bridle fiercely, almost overturning his animal.

Straight on came Dilemma, running like a huge, horned grayhound, the winner of the race.

White with anger the horseman came in, but there was no redress; even his personal friends adjudged him the loser. The rules said nothing against bellowing.

The matter might not have ended here, only for a truly startling event which just then took place.

A loud yell was heard. A large crowd collected as by magic near the pavilion, from which some man was speaking. Then the yell grew clearer—words were audible—words that threatened death to Leo Friend!

CHAPTER VIII.

FANNING THE FLAMES.

GERALD EVANS was the prime cause of this disturbance. As already stated, it was through him that Leo Friend was arrested and brought to trial, but his connection with the matter went far back of this, as, in due time, will be shown. He had reasons sufficient for the part he was playing, but only one of them need be mentioned here.

Gerald Evans was a suitor for the hand of Belle Gladden, and, despite the fact of his forty and odd years—not that any person would have believed him over thirty, at the outside—he was deeply, madly in love, with a passion that knew no bounds. From the first his attentions had been marked, and one by one the rural swains abandoned the unequal contest, until Evans and Friend alone were avowed contestants for the fair prize. First one and then the other was favorite with the speculating on-lookers. Few doubted that Leo was more agreeable to Bella, but nearly all knew that Gerald had a strong ally in Anderson Gladden, and that the good-natured giant improved every opportunity of sounding the praises of Evans.

One fact which made the rivalry more intense, and gave it a greater interest to the community at large was: Gerald Evans was a Mormon, and, next to Sidney Rigdon, Joseph Smith's staunchest supporter, while Leo Friend was an obstinate unbeliever. Thus the friends of the two were pretty equally divided.

From the first appearance of the Mormon

pioneers in Missouri, a dead set had been made at Anderson Gladden, partly because he was rich, partly because he was very popular among the settlers, and could bring with him a strong and influential support. By working upon his superstition and love of gold, his conversion was readily effected, but Belle was not so pliable. Her heart had gone out to Leo Friend, the handsome, reckless scuffer, and Gerald was astute enough to see that as long as Leo remained upon the stage there was not the faintest chance of his winning the heavy stake for which he played.

It was through him that Martha Foster was enabled to prevent Leo from keeping his appointment, though she did not suspect the truly satanic plot which the Mormon agent had formed, and in which he was using her as the cat's-paw. Imagine his astonishment, then, when she boldly testified to what he knew was a falsehood—that Leo Friend had left her house, in ample time to have reached the scene of and commit the murder of which he stood accused. He knew that she loved the prisoner with every fiber of her passionate, wayward heart; then why had she sworn what the maid-servant spoken of could easily prove untrue? Wondering then, he gave the signal which dispatched Hark Foster to school the servant what to say, or else remove her entirely.

His heart was filled with gall when the jury announced their decision and the prisoner was remanded to jail to await the arrival of the new witness. He knew that the longer the delay, the more chance there was of the truth leaking out. Few men are lynched in cold blood; such a deed looks very serious after a night's reflection.

Knowing this, Gerald Evans resolved to play his hand boldly, and to bring his rival to the rope if it lay in human power. His efforts for a while were confined to his more immediate friends and sympathizers, dwelling mainly upon the fact that Friend owed his reprieve almost wholly to Sweet William, whose actions of the past night had earned the bitter hatred of all Mormon sympathizers.

Determined and vindictive though his efforts were, it may well be doubted whether they would have resulted in any decisive action, only for a happy suggestion made by one of his friends, none other than Sidney Rigdon, the crafty.

"If Larkin's wife was sober enough to understand what you wanted, and you could get her to come up here, one word from her would do more than we could, though we split our throats with virtuous indignation."

Like an inspiration Gerald Evans saw the value of this suggestion, if properly carried out. The game was not yet lost.

Swift of foot, he soon reached the cabin where dwelt the widow of the murdered drover. As Rigdon had hinted, Evans found her half-stupefied with liquor, one child sobbing in the corner, a baby nuzzling at her breast as she lay, half in bed, half upon a chair.

For a moment Evans stood gnawing his lip in a sullen rage. To be baffled again; it was very bitter.

He stepped to the door and cast a swift glance around. There was not a living being in sight. Stepping back, he closed the door, pulling in the catch-string.

The woman lifted her head slightly as he glided softly to her side, but fell forward again, too drunk to help herself. He shook her by the shoulder, but an inarticulate murmur was the only answer. He rolled the baby to the further side of the bed, then caught up the pail of water which stood in one corner, filling the long-handled gourd and holding it high above his head, let the water fall in a stream full upon the woman's head and neck. With a stifed cry, she sought to regain her feet, but with one hand he held her still, while the other pitilessly administered the cold water cure.

The effect was all he could have wished for, and five minutes later the woman was, if not perfectly sober, sufficiently so to understand all that was required of her. There was no persuasion needed. A single motion of Gerald's hand was enough.

"Tell me what you want, and I will do it," she said, in a full, mellow tone.

Evans looked at her with awakened curiosity. Though a confirmed drunkard, Nell Larkin was still a beautiful woman, though of a rather large and sensual type. In days gone by, she had been a rising light upon the tragic stage, and had already made her mark as Cleopatra and similar creations, but love of liquor proved her bane, and after an unusually disgraceful failure, through intoxication, she abandoned the stage and married Don Larkin, then a worthy young planter. Of their after career it is unnecessary to speak at length. Enough that Evans found in her a willing as well as able coadjutor in his plot against the life of his rival, and when he left the cabin it was with a fierce, deadly joy at his heart. He laughed at the descending sun and promised it a feast of blood ere it could hide itself behind the western hills.

Hastening back to the pavilion, he sought out Belle Gladden, who, though her heart was bruised and aching, was too proud to hide from

the curious, half-pitying eyes of her friends and neighbors. Mechanically she accepted the proffered hand, but the dance was broken up in a very few minutes by the appearance of Nell Larkin and her babes.

Her dress was disordered, her black hair hung down past her waist, her eyes were red as with incessant weeping, the babe at her breast, the child clinging to her skirts, were both wailing.

Her speech was passionate enough, but if reproduced here would lack the fire and pathos lent by her admirable acting. Even those who knew her best—who well knew what a cat-and-dog life the twain had led—were completely carried away by her appeal for vengeance upon the assassin of the father of her helpless babes. Never in her palmiest days had the actress achieved such a complete triumph.

For a moment after her voice died away in a heart-rending wail, all was silence. Then a cry arose—the yell for vengeance—the cry for blood!

Like the rest, Gerald Evans seemed electrified and transformed. Leaping upon the railing, he addressed the excited crowd. An eye for an eye was his text. Was a packed jury to be allowed to turn a blood-stained robber into their midst—to pronounce him their equal in honor and innocence?

"Lynch him ef he ain't more'n *your* ekil in them two p'int's!" shouted Sweet William, pressing through the crowd.

These words, meant for irony, were unfortunate. The first two were caught up and repeated by a score of sturdy throats, and "Lynch him!" filled the air and still further inflamed the evil passions which had been awakened by the acting of Nell Larkin.

Sweet William saw his mistake, and squaring his shoulders, forced his way to the edge of the crowd, then clapped a hand to his mouth and sounded his wild war-cry:

"*Hough—ough—ough—ow—gh!*"

At twenty different points the crowd was thrown into confusion at that thrilling yell, and from his elevated position Gerald Evans could see as many stout men fighting their way toward the giant trapper. More than that, he recognized among them many of those who had helped to break up the Mormon meeting on the evening before, and divining their purpose, he repeated the cry of vengeance, and leaped into the mass.

No more was needed. Each faction had its leader, and the most intrepid would win the day.

Repeating his rallying cry, Sweet William pressed toward the little log jail, snatching up a huge beam of wood as he passed by a newly reared cabin. Here he was joined by nearly one-half his men, all who had succeeded in extricating themselves from the crowd before Evans led the furious charge.

"Four o' you fellers bu'st in the door," cried the trapper. "Rest o' you do as I do. Don't burn powder afore I shoot—then wade in fer all you're wuth! Halt!"

Half a score leveled rifles enforced the stern challenge, and even Evans, who saw that the giant trapper had singled him out in particular, came to a pause.

"Ef you're white men, you'll give the pris'ner a show fer his life. No lynchin'—a fair trial an' no favor! Ef he's found guilty, I'll be the last to say let him go. But ontill that sentence is jestly passed onto him, I'll fight fer him to the bitter end. Now come on ef you want to smell brimstone!"

"He is breaking down the door to turn the murderer loose upon us to commit more crimes!" snarled Evans.

"A lie—an' he knows it! The boy is innocent ontill he's proved guilty, an' he shain't be murdered without a chauce to fight fer his life."

"He is guilty!" and a man dashed up on horseback. "Here is the servant-girl—she swears that Leo Friend left the house at half-past eight o'clock, last night!"

"Lynch him—lynch the murderer!"

"A fair trial—let the Vigilantes settle it!"

But the blood of the mob was fairly up, and they would not listen to reason. A shot was fired, none could tell by which party; but it was enough.

More like wild beasts than human beings the two factions closed in a death-grapple. Shots were fired, knives were flashed, oaths and curses, yells and cries of agony rent the air. The beam was raised again, and hurled against the door. It gave way—the building was filled with infuriated men, thirsting for blood.

A wild, strange cry came from the interior.

CHAPTER IX.

FRIEND OR FOE?

WHEN Martha Foster beheld the desperate flight of her father, when she heard the warning cry of old Sweet William followed by the rapid firing of pistols and rifles, for one instant she lost the wonderful nerve which had sustained her through the trying ordeal—for such it was—of blasting the good name of the man she loved so madly. But only for one brief moment.

She too had caught the signal made by Gerald

Evans, and rightly interpreted its meaning, but she looked further ahead than he had. What confidence would be placed in the testimony of the maid-servant, if it was known that Hark Foster had seen her in time to give her the cue? The whole fabric which had been erected at such a cost, would be demolished with a breath, if no worse consequence followed. And yet she must be warned, for the true story would be even more injurious.

These reflections flashed through her mind with wonderful rapidity, and ere the echoes of the fire-arms died away, she had decided upon her plans and was at work.

In the confusion it was an easy matter for her to clear the crowd unnoticed, and putting her horse to its best speed, she left the village almost at right angles with the course followed by the chase. With whip and spur she urged her noble animal on, and right gallantly he responded to her call. Like a white meteor he flashed along the narrow, wood lined road, and the heart of his rider swelled with a proud exultation as the main road was regained, and she heard the sound of hoofstrokes far behind her—none in front.

The worst was over now. Only an unforeseen accident could baffle her now. She could reach the house, warn the servant, and disappear without her agency being suspected.

If she could only exchange one word with her father—if he could only understand how he was imperiling her cherished plans! It was worth the risk, and so deciding she drew rein at an abrupt curve in the road.

She had not long to wait. Spurring on in furious haste Hark Foster came in view. His eye was too experienced not to catch that bright figure, and one moment's signaling did the work. He waved his hand in token of comprehension, and away darted the white horse with its daring rider.

Hark Foster slackened his pace just enough to suffer his closest pursuer to come in sight, then plunged down a narrow, winding side-trail which, while considerably longer, still led to his house. The bait was taken. One by one the pursuers plunged into the woods in hot chase after the cunning old fox.

Mattie had ample time to carry out her purpose. The servant was posted as to the evidence she was to give, and, after bringing her mistress a small bottle from the house, she caught up a basket and hurried into the timber, while Mattie took up her position where she could catch the earliest glimpse of her father ere he could reach the house. A single motion was enough, then she dashed down the valley, followed by her father. The pursuers halted at the house with a loud cheer, believing that the old fox had been so hard pressed he dare not pause to accomplish his purpose.

"Let them yell," said Mattie, with a silvery laugh. "Nancy knows what she is to do, and will not hear their calls in a hurry. Now—we must return to the village. I say *must*," she repeated, as Hark stared at her in utter amazement. "Gerald Evans has used me as a puppet long enough. Both he and you lied to me. I can give you both to the Vigilantes by speaking one word, and true as there is a heaven above us I will do it, unless you help me in what I ask."

"They'll lynch me ef I go back—"

"They'll lynch you if you don't—that's flat. I will expose the whole plot. I will swear that Leo was in my room until hours after those men carried Don Larkin to the meeting. And, if that will not do, I'll tell them the names of those who compose the Crimson Clan—"

"Hush! they'd murder even you!" gasped the old man."

"Unless Leo lives I am willing to die. I tell you, father, he must and shall be saved, and you must aid me."

"Ef you'd told the truth in the fust place!"

"And so give him back to that doll face, Belle Gladden—I would rather see him dead! No; I mean to save his life, but all others shall believe him guilty. He shall be branded as an outlawed assassin—an object of horror to her—and then I will teach him to forget."

"Unless he's a fool he won't go, though you open the door to him. He knows he didn't do it—he don't think it kin be proved onto him; he won't go, I tell ye."

Mattie laughed and drew the phial from her bosom.

"He *will* go. Now, swear that you will not fail me; bah! you dare not. Go—bring Johnson's cart as near the jail as you dare. Wait for my signal; then drive up and take what is given you. Haste! remember the stakes!"

Knowing how useless it would be for him to attempt to reason further with his daughter in her present state of mind, Hank Foster plunged into the woods to carry out her commands. He knew that her threats were not uttered at random. She would, if driven to the wall, utter his death-sentence, though the same words cost her own life.

Rapidly Mattie rode on to the town, dismounting and tying her horse in a clump of trees but a few yards from the log jail. There was no doubt expressed in her face or movements, and she seemed assured of success as she

reached the door, tapping smartly upon it with the handle of her whip.

"Who's thar, an' what ye want?" came a deep, impatient voice, in response.

A faint smile curled her red lips as Martha gave a peculiar succession of raps, then bent her ear in listening. As a faint sound came from the other side of the door, she struck two sharp, impatient blows upon the slabs.

The effect was magical. The heavy barrier swung inward, and a huge, uncouth-looking fellow gave a sleepish bow as he stood aside to give her entrance.

The prisoner who had arisen as the door opened, no sooner saw who the visitor was, than he frowned and resumed his seat.

"You are not pleased, Leo," uttered the soft, almost caressing voice of the strange girl, as she glided to his side. "And yet I am come to save your life."

"After having sworn it away—for what you said was false, false as sin itself!"

"I was bound by my oath—I could only tell the real truth. You did leave me at the hour I stated, as Nancy, the servant-girl will testify. They have sent for her now. She may be here at any moment. Let her tell her story, and you will hang; the hand of Heaven itself could not save you! That is why I am here—to save you. Come! flee for your life. It is only until the real criminals can be hunted down. Once free, you can soon prove your innocence; but if you do not accept this chance, you will never see another sun rise in this world!"

"You forget *him*," nodding toward the guard, who was eagerly listening to every word, wonder in his eyes.

"I do not. Whatever I say he will do. Am I right, Jones?"

The guard nodded slowly, but scratched his head with a sorely perplexed air. He had not penetrated the mystery as yet. Mattie saw this, and drawing him impatiently to the furthest corner of the room, spoke in quick, earnest whispers. The slowly succeeding changes in the fellow's heavy countenance would have been amusing, at any other time, but now Mattie felt only irritation.

"You shall be held harmless, I swear it!" she cried, aloud.

"There is no need, Miss Foster," said Friend, coldly. "Your proposal may be meant in all kindness, but I have learned from sad experience the need of caution. I will not leave this place until I am called for trial. I am innocent—you know that. Were I to run away now, everybody would deem me guilty; and they would be right. Whatever fate there may be in store for me, I will face it like a man, not run from it like a guilty coward."

"And I swear to you that you will be lynched before another hour passes by, unless you flee. You will die, and your grave will be accursed. You will be remembered as a convicted midnight assassin—"

"Better that than live as one. You may be a very good friend, Miss Foster, but you take a curious method of showing it. Once for all, I will not accept your proposal. If you are wise, you will go, now. You are a woman, and I would hate to use harsh words—go, I beg of you!"

As though offended, Mattie turned to the door, but after a quick glance outside, she turned and glided close to Leo. She looked up into his face and seemed about to speak; but the veins in her neck began to swell, her lithe form quivered and she seemed about to faint.

Instinctively Leo caught her in his arms; a fatal movement! Jones flung an arm around his throat, clapping his other hand over his mouth, effectually checking all outcry. With a low laugh, Mattie slipped out of his arms, and wetting her handkerchief from the vial, pressed the cloth firmly over Leo's nostrils. A few faint struggles, then his limbs hung limp and nerveless. He was senseless.*

Just then Hark Foster thrust his head into the room. Mattie bade him enter, with a laugh. Then, by her directions, the two men bore the senseless body out to the light wagon which Foster had borrowed for the occasion. This accomplished, Mattie spoke to Jones.

"You will go back and close the door, yourself inside. Take this bottle and wet a rag with the stuff. Lay down and put the rag over your face. It will not hurt you; only put you to sleep for an hour or so. Before that time the escape will be discovered. All you need say is this: The prisoner drugged you, by thrusting the rag in your face. When you fell, you saw the door open, and several men came inside. These men all had red marks over their faces. Then you lost your senses, and know nothing more, you understand?"

"They'll lynch me—"

"No they won't—and remember your oath!"

With a lugubrious groan, Jones retraced his steps to the jail. Foster and daughter muffled their captive up in a blanket, then Mattie

* The critical reader may remember that chloroform did not come into use until after the date of this story, but a preparation of sulphuric ether was used in the same manner, though slower in taking effect.—AUTHOR.

mounted her horse and they hastened away. None too soon! They heard the yell of vengeance—the cry for blood!

The mob was rising—but their prey was gone!

CHAPTER X. OUTLAWED.

A WILD cry that thrilled through the crowd like magic—then a limp and nerveless shape was passed out of the building from hand to hand. At the first glimpse of the helpless body a fearful chorus went up from a hundred throats—the exultant yell of the famishing tiger as he leaps upon his palpitating prey. There was blood in their eyes, they unconsciously licked their fury-parched lips, they were eager to crack his bones and drain his veins—“He is gone—he has escaped!”

It was the wild, strange sounding voice again, but this time uttering articulate words—words that fell like a shower of ice upon the mad passions of the mob. Escaped? Left them to vent their just vengeance upon—what? Nothing. They could only curse the devil for aiding his own.

There was no more fighting, because there was nothing to fight for. All now was burning curiosity. How had he effected his escape? Could the jailer speak? Surely he was not dead?

The moment was auspicious, and the chief of the Vigilantes promptly improved his opportunity. His shrill signal echoed through the crowd, and like men just awakening from an unpleasant dream, his followers extricated themselves from the mob, and held themselves in readiness to carry out his commands. These were brief and to the point.

“Take possession of that body, and assemble at the pavilion. Keep back the crowd, if need be, at the point of your knives. There is work for our order in this, and we unto him who dares to interfere!”

In silence the mob divided and fell back. Their reckless passions seemed to have been banished by the startling discovery that he for whom they had been fighting was far beyond their reach. In silence they beheld the black-robed man lift up the insensible guard and slowly bear him to the now deserted pavilion. Still in silence they followed, but none ventured to pass the barrier; only the Vigilantes and their hoped for witness occupied the platform.

Cold water was brought and dashed freely over the heavily breathing man, and after a time his eyes opened, his senses returned. But his teeth were tight-closed, nor would he answer a question until he had thoroughly recalled his instructions and remembered just what Mattie Foster bade him confess.

His story need not be reproduced here. Enough that he doggedly followed out the line indicated by the strange girl. It was enough. His mention of the men in the red masks formed the climax.

“Fa'r play all 'round,” boldly cried Sweet William. “Thar's the galsarvant-witness; call her up an' see what she kin tell.”

If the giant trapper spoke in behalf of Leo Friend, his was an unfortunate suggestion. The woman—a coarse, ignorant creature whose only merit was that of blind fidelity to her mistress, clambered over the railing without further solicitation, and promptly replied to the questions put to her by the chief. Her evidence fully corroborated the testimony given by her mistress; that Leo Friend left the house at half-past eight o'clock in the evening, alone and apparently in the full possession of all his faculties.

Motioning her aside, the chief put the question to his men, one by one—guilty or not guilty?

The voting was unanimous. Leo Friend was pronounced guilty of murder.

“Friends and neighbors,” said the chief, stepping upon the railing and addressing the congregation. “You have heard the evidence and our decision. Leo Friend is a convicted robber and assassin. By the authority vested in me, as the chief of the Vigilance Committee, I pronounce him an outlaw, and offer one hundred dollars for him, dead or alive!”

A low, heart-breaking wail sent a thrill through the crowd, and the fainting form of a woman was borne hastily away.

That woman was Belle Gladden. In vain her father had persuaded her to return home. Though each moment was one of agony to the most intense, she would not abandon the scene while the fate of him whom she loved with all the ardor of her young, pure heart, was hanging in the balance. And when the bitter blow fell, she fell with it.

Gerald Evans lent his aid in carrying her to the farm-house. His heart was in a tumult of fierce exultation. He no longer felt the livid bruise upon his face. His cunningly-laid plans had succeeded, at least in part. True, as he believed, Leo Friend was at liberty, but he was outlawed, his life at the disposal of the first man who chanced to meet him. He would be hunted down as though he were a mad-dog!

With a firm resolution he choked down his exultation, even after the now sensible but still heart-sick girl was left to the care of the old negress who was in reality mistress of the house.

In silence Anderson Gladden filled and lit his

pipe as the two men sat upon the vine-wreathed porch before the house. But Evans did not long respect the settler's evident wish for silent thought.

“I warned you—but you would not listen,” began Evans abruptly. “You said it was only an idle fancy—that she would never dream of falling in love with him, after you expressed your disapproval. Now—she fainted when he was pronounced guilty and an outlaw with a price upon his head. How do you explain that?”

“She liked him as a friend—nothin' more, as I raaly b'lieve,” slowly responded Gladden. “Twas a shock—I don't know but what I felt it 'most as hard' as she did. They's some mistake—'tain't in the boy to be 'eternally wicked.”

“You forget the evidence. Surely that was conclusive.”

“Not enough to hang a sheep-killin' dog. That gal of Foster's lied once—I b'lieve she lied clean through!”

“Well, what is done is done, and we cannot mend it. I didn't stop here for the purpose of discussing that subject. What I want to know is, when are you going to give me the hand of your daughter?”

“When she says you kin hev it. Kin I say any more?”

“You can do more,” was the impatient response. “Use your authority—make her consent—”

“Stop thar—stop right thar, Gerald Evans. I don't reckon you want to insult me, but you do, in sayin' them words. Ef you kin win Belle's consent, I'm more'n willin'. They ain't a man in the State I'd rather hev marry her than you, though I say it to your face. I've praised you to her—she knows jest what I'd like to hev her do. But I won't go no furdur. Ef she takes you, it must be of her own a'cord. And mind this: if you dar' so much as hint at my forcin' her to do a thing ag'inst her will, I'll jest lick you clean out o' your boots! That's said an' swore to.”

Evans sprung to his feet, an angry reply upon his tongue, but whatever he meant to say was checked by the approach of two men, who had already crossed the stile.

“Peace be with you, brethern,” said the foremost, a tall, saturnine looking being, apparently of middle age.

Evans nodded shortly, but Gladden received the Prophet—for the speaker was none other than Joseph Smith, his companion being the astute Sidney Rigdon—with an humble enthusiasm painful to witness.

“Brother Gladden,” said Smith, his tones sounding still more owl-like, “this afternoon, as I knelt in the wilderness praying for the speedy enlightenment of those benighted heathens who disturbed our ceremonies last evening, the finger of the Lord was laid upon my heart, and sweet words of balm were poured into my ears. The time has come—the leaden seal has been lifted from off mine eyes—the secrets of nature are laid open to my hands—that is,” and as though conscious he had lost his way in a labyrinth of words, Smith gazed appealingly toward Sidney Rigdon, who immediately came to his assistance.

“The magic stone has not lost its virtues, and long prayer has cleansed the Prophet's vision. His promise to you can now be fulfilled. Earth will be forced to yield up its secret boards—”

“You kin show me the gold?” eagerly cried Gladden, his one great vice taking possession of him.

“I can—through this,” and Smith tapped his breast, where a small package was protruding.

“There are conditions. If you can fulfill them, there is nothing to hinder us from unearthing the secret treasure.”

“What are they? quick!” breathlessly panted Gladden.

“There is plenty of time,” coolly responded Smith, playing with his covetous dupe as a cat plays with a mouse. “We cannot do the work before midnight.”

“But we kin git ready,” urged Gladden, beseechingly.

“The first thing necessary is to procure a ram—a black ram; one that has not a single white hair upon it, or—our efforts will end in disappointment if nothing worse.”

“I've got one!” cried Gladden, with a laugh of triumph. “Ef they's a white ha'r about him, I'll eat the whole critter, alive an' kick-in!”

“Then our success is assured! Only—remember, this is only the beginning of a long series of discoveries; but this first treasure, to insure the finding of other and greater ones, must be dedicated to spreading the one true and only religion.”

“Then we don't git none of it?” faltered the settler.

“It is a sacred trust,” solemnly responded Smith, baring his head. “In everything the first fruits must be devoted to our Master, if we would be blessed and prosperous. But only the first. After that, we may enrich our poor selves.”

“But I ain't got only the one pure black ram,” persisted Gladden, in a doleful tone.

“If we are faithful to our trust, doubt not

that an easy substitute will be furnished for our further explorations. You must banish all doubt. A skeptic cannot enter the charmed circle. It would draw the fire of Heaven—”

“Chain lightning would glance from your brazen cheek and never leave a dent to show where it struck!”

Had a thunderbolt fallen in their midst it could not have astonished the party more than did this speech, coming from they knew not where. Not a living being was in sight save themselves, yet the voice sounded from their very midst.

“Look through your magic stone, Joseph Smith!” came the strange voice, followed by a mocking laugh.

The false Prophet trembled like an aspen leaf, for he recognized the voice as the same which had covered him with shame and confusion on the night before.

Not so the others. With drawn weapons they searched the grounds, foot by foot. But in vain. One more taunting laugh, then all was still.

CHAPTER VI. TAKEN PRISONER.

ONCE more the Crimson Room. The lights burning low seem to cast a peculiar haze over and around the two occupants of the apartment.

Upon the bed lay Leo Friend; pale and death-like; only the keenest eye could detect the slow, faint rise and fall of his bosom. He was still under the influence of that baleful drug.

Beside the bed knelt Martha Foster, her white face looking strangely worn and haggard. The past twenty-four hours had borne heavily upon her, and left their mark upon both mind and body. Her head bowed low over the stupefied man, and her lips rested upon his with a long, clinging pressure, with a fierce yet despairing ardor that might almost have warmed a dead man to life.

A sobbing cry parted her lips as she started back. That passionate kiss had not been all in vain. The power of the drug was broken. The outlawed man stirred feebly, his eyes opened, a name trembled upon his lips. A name, but not that of the woman who bent over him, her soul in her eyes.

With a low, sobbing moan, Martha Foster drew back, for the name lingering upon the lips of the man she loved so madly was that of her fair rival.

The impulsive movement, the soft rustle of her garments, seemed to complete the cure, and as Leo Friend turned his head quickly toward her, the light of reason filled his eyes. He recognized her—an expression of utter loathing overspread his countenance as he involuntarily shrunk back.

In reason, nothing less could have been expected, but Martha Foster was long since past that stage. Until that moment she had hoped to prevail over all obstacles. Her love was so great that it must conquer. So she believed. But now! She realized the truth. She knew that Leo hated, loathed her. Were she the last woman upon earth, he would die before granting her one tender look, one compassionate word.

She realized all this, and a startling change came over her. All in a moment she believed her love changed to hatred even more intense. She could drive her knife to his heart and laugh with fierce joy as his life bubbled out with the red blood. She could—but that would be all too merciful a death. He should die, and the worms should eat him, but not just yet. He should drain the cup of degradation and shame to its very dregs; and then, as he stood beside his grave of shame and obloquy, she would whisper in his ear:

“This is my work—my hand brought you to this—for this you laughed my love to scorn, but I am revenged!”

If Leo Friend read all or a portion of this in the strange woman's rapidly changing expression, he gave no sign. For a moment he closed his eyes, and with a resolute effort pierced the dizzy cloud that shrouded his brain. Bit by bit the past came back to him, until she could remember falling helpless before that terrible drug.

With an effort he arose, but as his feet touched the floor, his brain reeled, and he was forced to sit down upon the edge of the bed. When the mist passed from before his eyes, he beheld Mattie standing before him, a mocking smile upon her darkly beautiful face.

“I am truly glad to see that you have changed your mind about fleeing from the hangman, Mr. Friend.”

“From the frying-pan into the fire,” said Leo, with a hard, bitter laugh. “God preserve me from such friends as you!”

“I was your friend—once; but you threw me over when I had served your turn. You chose my enmity, instead. And yet—fool that I am! I risked my life to preserve yours. But for me, ere this hour you would have died the death of a dog—”

“But for you, I would have been pronounced, what I am, before heaven! an innocent man. There was no evidence against me; no jury could have convicted me.”

"My servant testified that you left this house before nine o'clock, last night."

"Then she, like her mistress, swore a lie black as night itself! You know you have perjured yourself; and for what?"

"For revenge!" the answer came, hot and passionate. "What was I, when you first met me? A girl, foolish, perhaps, but pure and innocent as the child unborn. You taught me love—you played upon my foolish heart until it answered the faintest touch of your skillful fingers. You filled my soul with idolatry, and taught me that I was a woman. You made me believe in you as in a god. A thousand times you swore that you loved me, and me only. And I—like a silly fool I believed you. Your wish was my law. I yielded to you in everything, great or small. I gave you my heart, my soul. Merciful Father! how I loved you! I would have torn the very heart out of my bosom and laid it at your feet, had you asked me. And what was my reward? A few months' living in a fool's paradise; no more. You grew weary of such unreasoning devotion. You sighed for fresh worlds to conquer. Still a fool, I begged and sighed and pleaded where I should have commanded. You laughed and left me. You found me a soft-hearted girl; you left me a stone-hearted devil. I swore I would be revenged. I meant it, too, but whenever I tried to strike home, my heart softened. I could not forget the happy days of the past. I loved even while I hated you. I gave you one more chance. You refused to accept it—you even taunted me with your love for another woman. Those words killed my love, as I believed then, and I resolved to punish you. I was working out my vengeance, even then, though I did not know it. I alone know where and how you spent the hour when that murder was said to have taken place. You are innocent—I can admit that, since you have no witness here to mark my words. I deliberately swore away your life, at the trial. But you had stronger friends than I thought. The first fury passed, and you still lived. This night would have seen you a cleared man, only for me. I rode here and told my servant what to testify. Then I forced you to flee. What for? To deepen the popular impression of your guilt, to lengthen your torture, to change you into a wild beast, hunted of all men. Have I not kept my words? Am I not revenged?"

"You dare to confess this—I could strangle you as you stand, and you unable to alarm your friends," muttered Leo, half-dazed before her hot, passionate confession.

The strange girl only laughed contemptuously as she moved closer to him, holding out a small pistol.

"Do you think I value life so highly? From the first you have been a traitorous dog; for once show yourself a man. Take this—here is the bosom, where your head has rested, more than once. Send the lead home—and I will die, blessing the hand that put an end to a blighted life."

"You are a woman," muttered Friend, turning away.

"And you are the semblance of a man, only," laughed Mattie, as she sounded a small whistle.

The young man started at the sound and cast his eyes around as though seeking for a weapon with which he might defend himself. But as the door opened, only a woman appeared.

"Nancy," said Mattie, coldly; "tell this gentleman the decision of the Vigilance Committee."

"They outlawed him, and offered a hundred dollars for his head, dead or alive," came the low, quiet response.

"That will do; you can go. Now, sir," she added, as the door closed noiselessly behind the woman. "You see the beginning of my revenge. The first man you meet will either kill or capture you; and capture means death by hanging. Yet—I am still a fool! I can save you—I will save you, if you will only—bah! I stammer and blush like the silly fool I was before I really knew you. This is my offer, and for the last time. Go with me—and promise to love me, as you once swore you did—and I will carry you to safety. Refuse—"

"I do refuse—I would sooner make a compact with a rattlesnake," impetuously cried Leo.

"Enough. I was mad to dream of anything else. Come—you have cast your last and only hope behind you. You leave this house, an outcast, and may the first living being whom you meet deliver you up to a shameful death!"

Without a word Leo followed her from the room and out of the house. The heavy door closed behind him with a sullen thud. The sound quivered through him like a death-knell. A low groan broke from his lips. Like a mocking echo there came a solitary laugh from beyond the barrier; silvery and musical, yet taunting, stinging him to the heart as though it were a serpent's tooth.

Blindly he staggered on through the dark night. The wind was howling through the treetops, the black clouds were scudding athwart the heavens, and from afar came the lugubrious wail of a prowling wolf.

Outlawed—a price upon his head—mercilessly hunted by his once neighbors and friends eager

for the pitiful sum of blood-money—every man's hand against him! Merciful heaven! such a doom—and he an innocent man!

The fumes of the stupefying drug yet lurked in his brain, and deadened his high spirit; yet, despite all this, despite the fact that he had been doomed to death, Leo Friend had only one object in view. He would return to his prison. He would redeem his name thus far; he would not be branded as a willing fugitive from justice.

But the fates were against him. He was not to yield himself so easily; already a "stealthy foot was upon his trail—already a stout hand was outstretched to capture him.

For over a mile the silent shadow followed him. Why be in haste? Every moment was carrying them nearer to the village.

At last the blow fell. The shadow leaped upon the outlaw from behind, and easily twisted him to the ground. Not a sound did Leo utter. At that moment life did not seem worth a struggle.

His arms and ankles were securely bound, then he was uplifted and balanced across a pair of broad shoulders. As though only carrying an infant's weight, the captor strode on through the gloomy forest, treading the tangled undergrowth and passing over the broken ground with wonderful ease and celerity. His strength seemed unbounded, but at length he paused and lowered his burden to the ground, then glided noiselessly away.

His absence was only momentary. He returned and half-carried, half-dragged his prisoner through a dense fringe of bushes, into a cleared space. From the sound of his footsteps Leo knew that they were no longer in the open air. He believed—and rightly—that his captor had sought refuge in some sort of a cavern.

A strange lethargy had taken possession of his senses. He didn't even wonder what was to be the end of this strange adventure, or why his captor did not hasten to claim the promised blood-money. He sunk into a doze, as though the howling of the winds were a lullaby.

All at once his brain cleared. He could hear the sound of footsteps without—then a low, mocking laugh. The sounds paused before the cave; then the bushes rustled.

"Who's thar? Speak, or I'll plug ye!" sternly uttered a deep voice from the gloom beside him.

CHAPTER XII.

THE TREASURE-SEEKERS.

IN vain the four men searched the grounds, prying into every corner large enough to afford shelter to a rat, but ever with the same result. For a time the mocking laugh led them on, but then, with a long-drawn sound, more like a wail of despair than of triumph, the hidden voice died away and was heard no more.

Gerald Evans was the only one entirely free from superstition as, the search abandoned, they returned to the house and finished their consultation with closed doors. The Prophet was fiercely sullen, and Rigdon had to do the most of his talking for him, at first. But Anderson Gladden, who was simple and foolish only upon one point, produced a stout jug of home-made peach brandy, which, sweetened with wild honey, was not long in clearing away the superstitious fancies and uneasy doubts which the unknown voice had implanted in their minds.

"The devil and his satellites are abroad to-night," said Smith, in a deep, peculiar tone, as the rising tempest whistled shrilly around the cabin. "But we whose faith is planted on the rock of Zion need have no fear. Let the scoffers cringe and tremble—pass the jug, Rigdon."

Gladden moved uneasily in his chair as the old clock struck slowly. Smith laughed shrewdly. He knew that his dupe was only too ready to swallow the gilded bait, and that it would be but a waste of time to dally longer.

With a drunken affectation of reverent awe, he took a package from his bosom, and removing the wrappings, revealed his wonderful "sacred stone." Bowing his head over this for a moment in pretended prayer, Smith placed the stone in his hat, then buried his face in the ample brim. He spoke in low, muffled accents, as follows:

"Lo! the scales drop from mine eyes, and I behold the hidden treasures of the earth! Gold and jewels and precious stones—coined silver and printed bank-notes! The ransom of a king awaits our coming!"

"Can you describe the spot?" asked Rigdon, in a low, soft tone.

The answer was immediate, and a cry of joy parted Gladden's lips as he recognized the spot described. Smith raised his head with an impatient cry.

"An unbeliever spoke—the power has left me—I can see no more! It was you, Gladden! Your allegiance is but lip-deep—nay, no denial. The power fled at the sound of your voice. Had your faith been perfect, the power would have remained, and I would have discovered treasure enough to fill this room—"

"But the power will return, and since that treasure we found to-night is sacred to the

church, the interruption is not so unfortunate," dryly observed Gerald Evans.

"Time is passing; there is much to do before we can hope to handle the treasure," softly added Rigdon.

"I'll git the ram, an' the other things," eagerly said Gladden, in feverish haste to unearth the buried treasure.

Joseph Smith offered no objections, but before leaving the room, he buckled the half-emptied jug of peach brandy to his belt. Gladden carried the bound ram upon his shoulders, while Rigdon and Evans bore shovels and pickaxes.

The night was intensely dark. The wind was blowing a half-gale, whistling ominously through the treetops and around the rocky peaks, blowing damp and chilly, threatening rain.

In silence the treasure-seekers trudged on through the midnight gloom, fearing to use their lantern, lest some curious body should spy and follow them.

Grumbling was profuse, and curses frequent from all save Gladden. He was new to treasure-hunting, and his brain was too excited for him to be annoyed by such trifles as stumbling over roots and stones, or falling into unseen ditches. For months past Smith and his coadjutors had been preparing him for this hour, sparing no pains, playing their cards slowly and carefully, feeling that the prize for which they were striving was too precious to risk upon a hasty or ill-considered move. This night's work should form the last link in the chain that would bind the settler forever to their cause.

With a sigh of relief, Gladden paused at the designated spot, and lowered his living burden to the ground. The gloom was so intense that he alone knew where they were, but the doubts of his companions were quickly dispelled when the lantern was lighted and the spot inspected by its aid.

The situation was a favorable one for their purpose. In a small, almost circular valley, with high trees and dense undergrowth rising upon every hand, there was little danger of their lights attracting the attention of any night-walker, especially upon such a night.

Gladden was eager to get to work, but his impatience was sharply snubbed by Joseph Smith, upon whom the jug of peach brandy was beginning to produce a disagreeable effect. Rigdon, more prudent, or less satisfied with the influence already gained over the giant settler, endeavored to soften the rude rebuff.

"We can do nothing of importance before midnight," he muttered, soothingly. "Only the preliminaries. We must be patient or all our work will be in vain and the treasure will vanish before our eyes, even as we lay hands upon it."

"Not from mine," muttered Gladden. "Let me touch it, and neither saint nor devil kin break my grip!"

"Too much talking," sharply interposed the Prophet, as he lowered the jug from his lips. "Scatter and collect the wood for the fiery circle. Lively, now!"

"And you?" muttered Evans in a significant tone.

"Must ask a blessing on our enterprise."

"Drink to its success, you mean! Be careful, Joe Smith. He is nobody's fool. Let him get his eyes fairly open, and he will be the last feather. His influence against us would turn the scale, and we would have to skin out of this in a bigger hurry than we did from Jackson county. I speak for your good as well as mine."

There was no opportunity to say more, but this was enough. Smith saw that Evans was right, and instantly changed his tactics, like the good general he really was.

With his aid the necessary quantity of wood was collected; then, warning all to silence, he placed his magic stone in the crown of his hat, and bowing his face over it, moved slowly about in a gradually lessening circle. At length he paused, and stamping his foot firmly, cried:

"Here—the treasure lies here, directly beneath my foot!"

Gladden sprung forward, bearing the lantern. One glance, then he cried, in a tone of angry despair:

"Somebody's robbed us! That ground's bin dug up inside o' two days!"

"The treasure is here," cried Smith, after a quick glance at his friends. "The revelation comes from the Lord—and I saw the gold, even now, through this wonderful stone."

"Form the fires and sacrifice the ram—then we can settle all doubts," impatiently cried Evans.

"Listen," and the Prophet's voice was deep and sepulchral. Signs must take the place of words. After the work is once begun, the first tongue that utters a word will be seared with fire from heaven. Remember!"

The fagots were quickly formed into a circle around the designated spot, and ignited by means of the lantern. Smith drew a knife and cut the throat of the black ram, accompanying its death-struggles with weird and fantastic gestures, muttering an invocation in some unheard-of tongue. Then he motioned Gladden to ply his tools.

So far, all had progressed smoothly enough, but at the first stroke of the pick, a deep, hollow groan broke the silence, proceeding apparently from the mouth of the slaughtered ram. The four men stood as though petrified, and as they stared at the sacrificed animal, articulate words seemed to issue from its open jaws.

"Ye have wantonly murdered me—beware! The hour of thy doom is near at hand. Doomed—doomed!"

Even as they stood, the open jaws slowly closed, the head turned half over, then all was still.

Gladden alone seemed capable of motion. Unlike the others, he had really expected and was prepared for something supernatural, and so long as the interference of the unseen enemy was confined to words, he would not flinch.

His blows followed in quick succession, and the soft dirt flew in every direction, nor did he cease his labors when the mysterious voice again greeted their ears:

"The storm is rising. Three of the four shall die the death ere the new moon is full. The fourth shall be saved, if he will open his eyes and abandon the crooked trail pointed out by the blaspheming impostors. Be warned—be warned in time!"

The solemn voice seemed to fill the air, now floating above the heads of the treasure-seekers, now coming from behind, and again from the steadily growing hole; but Gladden toiled on with dogged perseverance. He had been warned what to expect, and he felt no surprise. Had he only cast a look upon the pale, terrified faces of his companions, his feelings might have undergone a change.

Then the sounds changed. From the bushes just ahead of him came the wailing cry of the deadly panther, and as he cast a startled glance in that direction, he saw, or fancied he saw, the twin eyes glaring savagely upon him. A wolf howled to the right; the loud snuff of a bear came from the left; and then the shrill *skirr* of a rattlesnake sounded in their midst.

That was enough! With loud yells of terror, the Prophet and his two accomplices leaped across the fiery circle and took to their heels through the black night as though a thousand fiends were close upon their heels.

A shrill, taunting laugh followed them; then the fierce chorus of animal voices broke out afresh.

With clubbed pick, the giant stood within the fiery circle, stern defiance in every feature—a glorious picture of undaunted courage, even when the strange voice added:

"Flee while you can, but shun those cowardly criminals, unless you would share their fate. Go! death awaits you here!"

Not a word did the giant speak, but his actions were plain enough. He shook his fist in scorn at the warning, then drove his pickaxe to the helve in the ground. A dull, peculiar sound followed, and a wild, almost agonizing thrill flashed along his nerves, for he knew that the treasure was at his feet.

He flung himself into the hole and tore the dirt aside with his naked hands until a wooden box was half uncovered. He grasped the end with maniacal force. The stout wood splintered and gave way. He flung the cover aside and—merciful heavens!

Instead of gold, a huge serpent lay coiled up in the box!

The warning rattle sounded—the flat, loathesome head lanced forth and struck him full in the face.

The fearful spell was broken. With a cry of horror and despair he sprang from the pit, followed by the angry reptile.

From the darkness came a repetition of that taunting laugh. Wild with baffled rage and despair, the giant glared around him. The laugh was repeated, and he fancied that the leaves of the bushes just before him were stirred.

With a howling roar of angry defiance, he plunged forward, but scarcely had he entered the bushes when a heavy weight seemed to fall upon his head, and he knew no more.

CHAPTER XIII.

JOSEPH SMITH, THE PROPHET.

BUT very few of the present generation know anything definite about the founder of Mormonism, and nearly every one who has written about him goes to one extreme or the other, making him either an injured angel or else a fiend incarnate. This chapter does not pretend to be history, but it does contain truth, and some portion of its contents are strictly essential to the full comprehension of what follows, as well as to what has gone before.

With this preface, I venture to quote from the recently published novel of a certain well-known poet:

"The murder of Joseph Smith, the so-called Prophet, meant more than any other similar event in history. This man, as well as his brother Hiram, was not only an honest, brave gentleman, but also a man of culture and refinement. Nothing in the New World ever so intensified the minds of men as the life and death of this singular man, Joseph Smith. On the one hand he was hated to death, on the other he was adored while living, worshiped while dead."

Thus writes the Poet of the Sieras, Now let us take a glance at the other side.

The father of Joseph Smith was one of that peculiar class popularly known as money-diggers, and neighborly tradition hath it that he not only coveted his neighbors' property but more than once appropriated it to his own use in the shape of horses and cattle. Joe was his favorite son, and a worthy chip of the old block. He was stated to possess the "second sight," and made right good use of his reputed talent, in one instance gaining a wife thereby.

He was then in Philadelphia, while the fair object of his affections resided in Harmony, in the same State. He had no money, could not borrow, and would not work for it. He selected a simple-hearted man named Lawrence, told him that he had, by second sight, discovered an immensely rich silver mine on the banks of the Susquehanna river; that they would divide the treasure if Lawrence would pay all the expenses incurred in reaching the spot. As an earnest of his truth Smith signed an agreement binding himself to serve Lawrence three years in case the mine did not prove to be exactly as he represented it.

Like many another before and since, Lawrence was beguiled by that plausible tongue. On their way they paused at Harmony, where Lawrence, who was an old and trusted friend of the family to which Smith wished to ally himself, very warmly recommended Joe to the parents of his innamorata.

After a brief stay here the treasure-seekers resumed their journey. The silver mine was sought for but not found. Joe repudiated his bond and hastened back to Harmony. The parents refused his suit, but Barkis was willing, and the young couple made a runaway match of it.

A few days sufficed to exhaust the small sum which Mrs. Joseph had brought him, and his whole mind was turned to getting back to Manchester, N. Y., where his relatives were living. A credulous Dutchman named Stowell enabled them to accomplish this. Smith told him that by his wonderful powers he had discovered in a cave on the banks of Black River, in Jefferson county, N. Y., a bar of pure gold three or four feet long and as thick as his leg; that it would be too heavy for one man to manage, and that he, Stowell, should have one-half of the treasure if he would pay the fare of the three to Manchester. To this the good Dutchman consented, but when, a few days after reaching Manchester, he ventured to remind Smith of the promise, Joseph flatly denied the whole story, and defied Stowell to produce any witness.

So much for his honesty and gentlemanliness. Again the poet writes:

"Nearly a hundred men, heavily masked, moving down upon a prison with its half-dozen inmates. A little tussle; one struggle at the door. Then a few shots. Then a few men lying in their blood upon the prison floors. Then a leap from the window, a fall; a man lying dead in the jail yard. Some masked men pick up the body. They sit it up against a pump in the yard, and then they, as if to be doubly certain, fire at the dead body of the Prophet as they file out of the jail yard and disappear."

"A pendulum must swing about as far one way as it does the other. Blood means blood. From the stains on that prison floor sprang the dragon's teeth. Out of that awful day came forth a singular conception: the Danites—Destroying Angels."

The story of the assassination is true enough, but, though few persons seem aware of the fact, the order of the Danites was established in 1838, a full year before the Mormons were driven out of Missouri. This society was organized in Caldwell county, Mo., at Far West, the Mormon capital. Its object at first was simply to drive dissenters out of the county. The members of the society were bound by an oath and covenant, with the penalty of death attached to a breach of it, to defend the presidency and each other unto death. They had their secret signs by which they knew each other either by day or night, and were divided into bands of tens and fifties, with a captain over each band and a general over the whole. Among those driven from the county were John and David Whitmer, Hiram Page and Oliver Cowdery, all witnesses to the Book of Mormon, and Lyman Johnson, one of the twelve apostles.

Captain Marryat gives a brief history of the Danites in a novel which was published before Joseph Smith was killed.

Joseph Smith is generally regarded as the author of the Mormon Bible, whereas the fact is that the book had passed into the hands of at least three persons before Smith knew anything of the matter, and ere he had even heard the name of Mormon mentioned.

The original "Book of Mormon" was written by a native of Connecticut, named Solomon Spaulding, a dreamy, fanciful man, who died a beggar. The manuscript fell into the hands of Lambdin and Patterson, printers, of Pittsburgh, and lay for years upon their shelves, unthought of and uncared for. The firm failed, and some time after, among the undisposed of rubbish, Lambdin came across the "Manuscript Found"—its original title. He was hard up, and seeing, as he fancied, a quaint humor in the work, he

resolved as a last resource to print it. With this intention he intrusted it to one Sidney Rigdon for revision, but died shortly afterward. Rigdon was struck by a sudden idea. Instead of a work of pure fiction, he would produce the book as a new code of religion. It was easy for him, from the first planning of his intended imposture, to publicly discuss, in the pulpit, many strange points of controversy which were eventually to become the corner stones of the structure which he wished to raise. With him Mormonism was a mere speculation by which money might be made, and he resolved to shelter himself behind some fool who might bear the whole odium, while he would reap a golden harvest and quietly retire before the coming of the storm. But as is often the case, he reckoned without his host, in selecting Joseph Smith as his tool. He wanted a compound of regucy and folly; Smith was a regue and an unlettered man, but he was also a man of bold conception, full of courage and mental energy, one of those unprincipled, yet lofty and aspiring beings who, centuries past, would have succeeded as well as Mahomet, and who did, even in this more enlightened age, accomplish that which is wonderful to contemplate. In a word, Rigdon became a slave, Smith the father of Mormonism.

As for the magic or sacred stone which has been alluded to in this story, it came into Smith's possession in the following manner. The affidavit which I give is a genuine one, as almost any old citizen of Manchester can testify.

"MANCHESTER, ONTARIO CO., N. Y., 1833.

"I became acquainted with the Smith family, known as the authors of the Mormon Bible, in the year 1820. At that time they were engaged in the money-digging business, which they followed until the latter part of the year 1827. In the year 1822, I was engaged in digging a well; I employed Joe Smith to assist me. After digging about twenty feet below the surface of the earth, we discovered a singular looking stone, which excited my curiosity. I brought it to the top of the well, and as we were examining it, Joseph laid it in the crown of his hat, and then put his face into the top of the hat. It has been said by Smith that he got the stone from God, but this is false.

"The next morning Joe came to me, and wished to obtain the stone, alleging that he could see in it; but I told him I did not wish to part with it, on account of its being a curiosity, but would lend it. After obtaining the stone, he began to publish abroad what wonders he could discover by looking into it, and made so much disturbance among the credulous part of the community, that I ordered the stone to be returned to me again. He had it in his possession about two years. I believe, some time in 1825, Hiram Smith (Joe's brother) came to me and wished to borrow the same stone, alleging that they wanted to accomplish some business of importance, which 'could not very well be done without the aid of the stone.' I told him it was of no very particular worth to me, but I merely wished to keep it as a curiosity, and that if he would pledge me his word and honor that I should have it when called for, he might have it; which he did, and took the stone. I thought I could rely on his word this time, as he had made a profession of religion; but in this I was disappointed, for he disregarded both his word and honor.

"In the fall of 1826, a friend called upon me, and wished to see that stone about which so much had been said; and I told him, if he would go with me to Smith's (a distance of about half a mile), he might see it. To my surprise, however, on asking Smith for the stone, he said, 'You cannot have it.' I told him it belonged to me; repeated to him the promise Hiram had made me at the time of obtaining the stone; upon which he faced me with a malignant look and said:

"'I don't care who the devil it belongs to; you shall not have it.'

"COL. NAHUM HOWARD."

It was through this "sacred stone" that Joseph Smith claimed to have discovered the "golden plates" upon which were written the books of Mormon, but it was three years after the first announcement that he "unearthed" them, and at his third attempt, he only being allowed one trial in each year. Thus he passed away the time until Sidney Rigdon had completed his work, and all was in readiness for the tremendous imposition.

CHAPTER XIV.

A LOVE SCENE CUT SHORT.

TWO days had passed by since that eventful Fourth of July. During the first of these two days, the woods and hills had been scoured in every direction by armed men, eager to earn the reward offered for Leo Friend, dead or alive, but each passing hour served to cool their ardor, and by sunset of the second day, all those in quest of the outlawed man could be numbered upon one's fingers. And even these began to believe that the object of their search had fled the State, as the only hope of preserving his liberty and life, and, naturally enough they also began to relax their efforts.

As the reader is aware, Leo Friend had never once contemplated voluntary flight, but was taken captive while on his way to deliver himself up to the Vigilance Committee.

His captor would not hear to this, as a voluntary surrender would render his claim for the reward null and void, but upon other points he was more compliant. First extracting a solemn pledge that Leo would fight to the death rather than submit to be captured by any other person, he accepted his parole for one week, during

which time Leo was to come and go as he wished, except that he was to report to his captor at least once in every four and twenty hours.

These terms were far more favorable than he could have expected, and, as his brain cast off the lingering influence of that baleful drug, he fully appreciated the favor. At least it would give him an opportunity of setting himself right in the estimation of Belle Gladden. After that, what matter?

He was not to accomplish his purpose so easily. Let but one curious eye light upon him, and the hue and cry would assuredly be raised. Yet, despite this danger, Leo hung around the Gladden place from morn to night. He saw the giant settler return from his disastrous treasure-hunting, reeling in his walk like a drunken man, but despite his unceasing watch, he did not catch a single glimpse of his loved one.

As the shades of night descended, he grew desperate, and relying upon his intimate acquaintance with the watch-dog, he stole cautiously up to the cabin. Through the window he saw Gladden crouching over the fireplace, moodily smoking his pipe, his face bruised and swollen, but nothing of Belle.

Only for his sacred pledge, he would have boldly entered the cabin, trusting in his innocence of wrong to carry him through the toils, but now he dared not venture. A sudden hope struck him and he glided around to the rear of the building. Softly clambering up on the roof of the lean-to, he bent far over the eaves and succeeded in pinning a bit of paper upon the sash of the window to the room in which he knew Belle slept. She could scarcely fail to notice this, on first awakening, and surely she would not deny the urgently worded request thereon.

Forced to content himself with this faint hope, Leo retreated from the grounds and hastened to report to his captor. Be sure he did not oversleep himself, but before the first gleam of dawn he was lying low in a bushy corner of the snake-fence, his gaze riveted upon the dimly visible house which contained the one rich jewel of his heart.

He fancied he could hear the window open then close. Was it Belle? had she discovered and secured the note?

As the red gleams of the rising sun shone upon the building, his heart leaped furiously. The bit of paper was gone! But who had taken it? If not Belle, then he was lost. The plainly indicated tryst would be kept, but death, not love, would be the drama there enacted.

The intervening hours were too full of painful suspense to be dwelt upon here. In vain did Leo wait and watch. Once or twice he caught a glimpse of Anderson Gladden, but never once of Belle. Save the settler and the negress, no other person was to be seen about the place that day.

The sun was setting. For an hour Leo Friend had been at the rendezvous, feverishly waiting and praying for the coming of his loved one. Each moment seemed an hour, each hour a lifetime. His heart grew sick and faint. He had eaten little and slept less since this dread trouble came upon him, and already his stout frame showed signs of breaking down. His eyes were hollow and sunken, his cheek was thin, his face wore a hunted expression inexpressibly sad to contemplate.

A faint footfall—a rustling of leaves—a light form appearing upon the edge of the little glade. One moment's hesitation—then, with a choking, tremulous cry, Leo sprang forward and infolded the maiden in his arms.

With the first few minutes of that meeting, we have nothing to do. Both were young, both were in love, one was in sore trouble; all is said in those words.

"I knew you would come!" and for the moment Leo forgot all the painful doubts and misgivings of that long and weary day. "I knew you would come, even though they have pronounced me an outlaw, and guilty of murder."

"That is what gave me the necessary courage, for I knew that you were innocent," came the soft, low response. "Ah! when that terrible man arose and pronounced you guilty—when he proclaimed you an outlaw, and set a price upon your head, I longed to spring forward and pin the base lie to his forehead! It was holding back the hot words that made me sick. My brain seemed bursting, and I knew nothing more until this morning, when I saw that bit of paper fastened to my window. Only for that, I believe I should have died. Not that I doubted your innocence, but that bold, bad woman—"

There was a little hug and a soft kiss. "You did not believe what she said?" "I did not want to," was the frank reply. "But she spoke so earnestly, and then, others have said nearly the same thing; that you were once very earnest in paying your attentions to her."

"That was before I knew you, pet. Since then, you have been my sun—Miss Foster not even the smallest star."

"It may be so; but how was I to know?" hesitated Belle.

"You would have known, on that evening. I had made up my mind to speak out—to dare

my fate; but she interfered, and you know what followed. Now—I am an outlaw, with a price set upon my head. I see no way of proving my innocence, and you are the only one, perhaps, in all the world, that believes me unjustly condemned. And even you—"

"Hush—do not say that. Would I be here now, unless I trusted you wholly and implicitly?"

"Yes, trust—but that is not—bah! I am not a villain, even if I am a fool," and Leo flung back his head with an impatient toss, as though casting temptation behind him.

The fair maiden drew closer to him. Her eyes were downcast, the little hand that nestled in his trembled like a leaf, but her voice, though low, was firm and steady.

"I can understand your feelings, Leo, and I believe I know what you would have said, just now. Wait—let me finish. You spoke of what you intended to ask me, on that night. If nothing had interfered, if you had spoken that question, my answer would have been—my answer is—Oh Leo! can't you guess what I would say, if I could?"

With a faint sound that was neither a laugh nor a sob, the little head was hidden beneath his arm. For one moment Leo stood as though dazed. Then with gentle force he raised the bowed head and looked fixedly into the blushing face. That one glance was enough. He read the glad truth. He—did exactly what you would have done had you been in his place, reader.

Their words were few and scarce, now, though their lips were not idle. They were in paradise. All else was forgotten but that one glorious fact; they loved and were beloved.

They forgot the black cloud which hung over them; forgot that he was outlawed, a price upon his head, the lawful prey of any and all men. They had eyes, ears, only for each other. They heard not the soft rustling of the bushes behind them. They saw not the white, rage-distorted face, the fire-flashing eyes that glared out upon them.

"We will go far away—where the black past cannot trouble us," softly whispered Leo. "We will live for each other—for love—"

"You forget father," was the gentle response. "I cannot leave him alone—you must not ask me."

"But he hates me—he will never consent—"

"Then we must wait. He is all alone, only for me. He would go mad if I deserted him. No, Leo. I love you—you are dearer far to me than my own life, but a curse would come upon us were I to prove so ungrateful to him. We are both young—we can wait."

"You forget that I am under sentence of death—that by speedy flight alone can I hope to live. I cannot—I will not leave without you. If you refuse, then I am a dead man!"

Belle did not reply; she could not. The hot, blinding tears choked her. It was hard, very hard; yet she knew that she was right. There was but one course for her.

A remorseful pang smote Leo as he felt her grief. He too remembered. He was bound as well. If he sought safety in flight, he would be dishonored, he would forfeit his solemnly pledged oath. In that moment of powerful temptation he had forgotten this, but the helpless grief of the maiden at his hard, cruel words, recalled his better self.

"You are right, Belle—I ask your pardon, I was half-crazy at the thought of losing you, and did not know what I was saying. Please do not cry. All may come right, yet, if we only have patience to wait."

"You must go—promise me that you will flee this very night," spoke the maiden between her sobs.

Leo gently drew her closer to his breast, and bowing his head, pressed a warm kiss upon her trembling lips.

The white face of the eavesdropper grew more ghastly and filled with a deadly, vindictive revenge. A slender tube was cautiously thrust through the leafy screen, the black muzzle bearing full upon the unconscious lovers.

Was it an intuitive sense of danger, or was it mere accident that caused Leo to raise his eyes at that instant? Enough that he did, that he caught sight of that white, vengeful face, of the leveled pistol. With one swift sweep of his strong arm he whirled Belle behind him. At the same instant a blinding flash filled the little glade as the weapon exploded. A red-hot iron seemed pressed against his cheek—he staggered and almost fell, but as a shrill, vindictive laugh met his ear, he leaped toward the spot from whence had sped the treacherous shot, thinking only of revenge.

The would-be assassin was not to be caught so easily. Flight instantly followed the shot, and though Leo strained every muscle in pursuit, he was too late. A shrill neigh, the quick trampling of hoofs accompanied by that taunting laugh, then a fleeting glimpse of the fugitive. He emptied his weapons in that direction, with what effect he knew not, for at that moment he heard a wailing cry come from the spot where he had left Belle Gladden.

Fearing the worst, he hastened back, forgetting that his weapons were unloaded. An an-

gry cry rose to his lips as he entered the glade. He saw the form of his loved one hanging upon the arm of a tall, dark figure.

He leaped forward, with a mad rage steeling his muscles, but a well known voice checked him half-way.

"Halt! or I'll plug ye! Throw up your han's—you're my pris'ner!" came the stern, sharp command.

The speaker was none other than Anderson Gladden!

CHAPTER XV.

THE ALTERNATIVE.

CROUCHING low, his muscles bent and eager for the death-grapple in defense of his heart's idol, Leo Friend recognized that stern voice, and his fierce, unreasoning rage was quelled as by magic. It was not wholly fear for himself, though the weapon of the giant settler covered his heart, and his was an aim that rarely missed its mark. Only a lover can understand just what Leo felt as he recalled his oath not to be taken alive. To one who loves truly, the relatives of his adored are made of better stuff than the common herd; they are, in a measure, sacred in his eyes, so far that to lift his hand against the humblest of whom requires no little nerve, and when the father is in question!

Unarmed, save with a knife, and covered with a pistol in the hand of a dead shot, Leo acted just as any man of sense would have acted; dropped his hands and yielded to the inevitable. This the more readily that he saw the maiden was uninjured, and looking appealingly toward him.

"Now, young man," added Gladden, after a brief pause. "They's jest two ways. You kin walk quietly 'long to the shanty, or I'll tote ye; which moughtn't be quite so pleasant fer neither on us. Which is it?"

"Why should I do either—" began the young man.

"Beca'se you can't help yourself. You're outlawed, a good price set onto your head. The law'd hold me up ef I was to shoot ye down without a word. Then you bin tryin' to coax my gal—never mind that, now. You're goin' with me, dead or alive. Take your choice."

Leo made no answer. He knew argument would only enrage the giant. Escape was impossible, under the circumstances. So, making a virtue of necessity, he quietly preceded father and daughter to the vine-wreathed cabin.

As Leo paused upon the threshold, Gladden signed for him to enter. Without a word the young man obeyed. Despite his strong will, he was awed by the grave, simple majesty of the rude, unlettered forester. He felt forced to obey, even while he wished to rebel.

Belle would have followed him, but Gladden restrained her. He sat down upon the doorstep, slowly filling and lighting his pipe. Not until the blue vapor curled around his massive head, did he seem to find the words he was seeking for.

"Young man, you hed a fa'r trial an' you was brung in guilty o' murder. As a law abidin' citizen, I'm bound to give you up to justice. Ef I do, you'll be hung—"

"Father, you will not—you cannot do this!" sobbed Belle, sinking at his knees, her tearful eyes uplifted to his hard set face. "They would murder him—and that would kill me, too! I could not live—"

"I knowed y'd be wuss o' the night air," quickly interposed Gladden, a strange tremor in his voice. "It runs in the blood, young feller. Her mother was the same way. She'd say things she never meant, when she was the least bit out o' health. She'd swar she loved them most which in her sober mind she wouldn't wipe her feet on."

As though fearing to listen further, Gladden summoned the old negress, who, by his orders conducted Belle, sobbing and pleading, to her own room. Gladden heaved a huge sigh of relief as she disappeared, then arose and confronted his prisoner.

"Take out your weapons an' lay 'em on that cheer. You won't need 'em while we're talkin', an' mebbe never at all; but that depends pritty much on how you take what I've got to say."

Still under that strange influence so difficult to describe in words, Leo obeyed, without a word.

Gladden nodded grave approval, then handed pipe and tobacco to the young man. Still in silence, Leo accepted the articles, filled and lighted the pipe. Seated opposite each other in the dimly lighted room, the two men smoked on, their eyes averted, as though fearing to read each other's thoughts.

"It depends on you whether you take up them weapons an' walk out o' this, a free man, fer all o' me, or whether I tie you hand an' foot an' give you over to the vigilantys."

"You must speak plainer, before I give an answer," quietly responded Leo, though, the moment he spoke the drift of the settler flashed across his mind.

"They's some things is mighty hard to talk about, an' this is one on 'em. You know how you're fixed. A judge an' jury has brung you in guilty o' murder. Mebbe you didn't do it,

I didn't believe it, until you run away from the jug while the case—"

"I was drugged and carried off, against my will, by my worst enemies," interposed the young man.

"It don't matter, much. You was brung in guilty. They's a price on your head, like you was a wolf or a painter. By rights I'd ought to hand ye over to jestice, without a word. But you heard what Belle said. She was sorter out o' her head, then, an' didn't mean all she said, but ruther then hurt her the least bit, I'd turn you loose. I will, if you'll pledge me your honor to one thing."

"And that is?" quietly demanded Leo.

"That you'll go straight away from here, an' never come back ag'in. I ain't a rich man, but I'll pay you cash down for your property here an' take it at your own price. You're to swar by the grave o' your mother, that you'll never set foot in this county so long as we two live here; that you'll never write a word to my gal, never send her a message o' any kind, an' that you'll never speak to her if you should ever meet her. Swar to this, an' you're a free man."

"You say I am an outlaw, convicted of robbery and murder. You would be foolish to believe the oath of such a man."

"I'm ready to run the risk. You're a white man. I've heard you talk of your mother, an' that was tears in your eyes. Ef you swar by her mem'ry, I know you'll keep the oath," was the quiet response.

"I thank you for that, at least. But now—listen to me," said Leo, in a low, yet passionate tone. "I swear by the sacred grave of my mother that I am innocent of the crime for which I stand outlawed. May she arise in her winding sheet and curse me forever, if I do not speak the truth! So much for that part of the question. Now for the other."

"I love your daughter better than I do my own soul. Though I know that before one week passes by I will be a dead man; though I were insured a hundred years of life for the mere saying so, I would not renounce my love for her. While I draw breath she will be first and foremost in my thoughts; when I die, I will die with her love in my heart, her name upon my lips."

"You will die, then, an' that afore another sun," sharply uttered Gladden, pulling quickly at his pipe.

"That may be. I know that you hold my life in your hands, but unarmed as I am, you will have to fight hard for it; not that I am afraid to die, but because my life is pledged to another. The moment I could free myself from those who abducted me from the jail, I started to give myself up to stand my trial. On the way I was taken prisoner by one who had already started out in hopes of earning the blood-money. For what inducement I obtained the favor need not be spoken of now. Enough that he gave me one week in which to arrange my affairs. I swore to fight against capture, no matter what the odds, and never to surrender while I breathed the breath of life. I mean to keep that oath. You may take my life, but you can't take my liberty."

"You won't do as I say, then?" and there was an anxious, almost sad cadence to the giant's voice.

"I cannot. I would break the most sacred oath you could devise, even though I tried honestly to keep it."

"I'm sorry—honestly sorry. You talk like a man, ef a foolish one. You've got 'most a hour yet. You kin think over your pra'rs. You'll never see the sun rise ag'in. I've sent the nigger to town with word that you was here."

Leo made no reply. The two men confronted each other, smoking slowly, calmly. It was a strange, weird situation. Waiting in motionless silence—for what?

Leo knew that there was only one hope for him, a hope, though faint. Only one man confronted him, sitting there in cold silence, just within arm's length. Before a weapon could be drawn he could have him by the throat. One stout blow, and he might be away, a free man, instead of idly waiting there for the arrival of the fresh enemies summoned by the giant.

Yet he did not stir. He could not raise his hand against the father of the maiden whom he so earnestly loved. He waited for the coming of the others. Against them he could and would fight, let the odds be what they might. He might be slain, but he would never be captured alive.

Slowly the old clock upon the wall ticked off the fleeting minutes. The clattering of horses' hoofs was heard without, but neither of the two men moved. The thin curls of blue smoke issued from their lips with the same calm regularity. And yet they were awaiting the coming of almost certain death.

Hasty footsteps, then three men paused upon the threshold. Leo's brow contracted as he recognized the foremost. More than ever he was resolved that death alone should conquer him—not Gerald Evans.

Gladden arose and gravely greeted the trio, whom he had not met since their venture at digging gold. Leo also arose and moved behind

his heavy oaken chair—no mean weapon in a struggle for life at close quarters. Evans was too eager for his prey to lose any time.

"Leo Friend, I arrest you in the name of—"

"Stop!" and as the side door opened, Belle sprang between the two men, between of Gerald's leveled pistol. "Shoot me—you must kill me first!"

Slowly she retreated toward her lover, one hand upraised and warning the others back, the other hand behind her holding a loaded pistol, which Leo eagerly grasped.

"Go, darling," he hurriedly muttered, as he cocked the weapon. "Go—leave him to me!"

Evans lowered his pistol with a hissing curse. Smith and Rigdon hurriedly drew aside as though fearing to intercept a bullet intended for their friend. Gladden was for the moment fairly stupefied by the sudden and inopportune appearance of the one whom he, until that moment, believed safe under lock and key. But he was the first to recover his senses, and made a step toward the excited girl.

"Stop! father," she cried thrillingly. "God knows how I love and honor you, but if you interfere now, I will hate you with all my soul! Four men upon one—for shame!"

At that moment a queer shock head thrust itself in at the open door, a huge body followed, but so silently that none heard the movement, and only the lovers, who were facing the entrance, were aware of the intrusion, until, with a swift celerity, the new-comer brushed past the four men and seated himself in the chair which stood before Leo.

"Don't let me interrupt the preformance, gentlemen," he said, in a deep, booming voice. "I'm nobody but old Sweet William—go on with your rat-killin'!"

CHAPTER XVI.

IN A TIGHT FIX.

FLATTENING himself against the ground, his head thrust into a bunch of dried grass, his eyes gleaming like those of an irritated snake, lay Simon Singleton. A man may be somewhat deficient in the article of sense, and yet be abundantly supplied with curiosity. That Simon was but one degree removed from a fool, few of those who knew him would doubt, and the general opinion would have been confirmed by the actions of the fellow on the night in question.

He was lying at full length upon his stomach in a small moonlight glade, one half-closed hand full of fire-flies, the sluggish movements of which he was lazily watching, when the cautious tread of some heavy animal broke the silence. A swift change came over the dreamer. The fire-flies were flung aside, he slid forward upon his stomach for several yards, until his head and shoulders were buried in a bunch of dead grass. His limbs were curiously coiled up, forming with his body, an oblong heap of what more nearly resembled a pile of dried and decaying leaves than aught human.

A moment later he heard a human footstep, then the bushes parted and a lithe, graceful figure entered the little glade. A moment's hesitation, then the new-comer passed on, within arm's length of the prostrate simpleton.

Something in that face, so ghastly white, or else in the stealthy, cat-like advance, stimulated Simple Simon's curiosity, for scarcely had the bushes closed behind the form than the fluttering mass of rags grew animated, and like a human snake, crawled silently along the fresh trail.

His self-imposed task was a short one. A few rods, then the white-faced figure came to a pause, with Simon close upon its heels, so close, in fact, that he dared not attempt to better his position now that his game had paused, the underbrush was so thick and tangled. The faintest rustle might turn the tables, and make him the hunted instead of the hunter.

He knew that the trailer was watching some thing or person; beyond that he was at a fault. Who or what that was, he could only surmise. Fortunately he was not kept long in suspense. A sharp report, a shrill, vindictive laugh; then the white-faced figure turned and fled, fairly springing over the prostrate scout.

Simon arose and plunged after the fugitive. Close upon his heels came vengeful Leo Friend, whose bullets were sent after Simon, not after his would-be assassin, whose mocking laugh came back in answer.

Untouched, though the leaden missiles whistled by him in unpleasant proximity to his ears, Simple Simon did not hesitate an instant. Guided by the sound of hoof-strokes, he pressed on in pursuit of the assassin with a swift ease which few men could have equaled, never pausing until the guiding sounds suddenly died away.

For one breath he stood with inclined ear, listening. Then, slowly and silently he advanced, parting the bushes without a rustle until he stood upon the edge of a wagon-road.

Nearly opposite him stood a snow-white mustang bearing the statuesque form of a woman whose right arm leveled a pistol full at the covert of the wondering Simon. Was *this* the assassin?

With ludicrous promptness, Simple Simon

ducked his head and crawled away from the line of the leveled weapon. Fool or no fool, he did not choose to be shot for another man.

A few minutes of impatient waiting for the appearance of her pursuer, then, with a low, bitter laugh, Mattie Foster galloped rapidly down the moon-lighted road.

As though the same impulse moved the two, Simple Simon started in swift pursuit, keeping upon the shady side of the road, running low, but with the speed and ease of a sure-footed hound. Never once did he lose sight of the reckless rider until after she had reached her home.

As she drew rein at the threshold, the door was opened and Hark Foster emerged. Simple Simon was near enough to note the anxious look upon the old man's face, but their low spoken words were inaudible.

His curiosity must have been strong indeed, or else he was too simple to realize the risk he was running in the attempt to gratify it, for, lying flat upon his stomach he crawled across an open space of ground and coiled his supple limbs up beneath a scrubby bush not thirty feet from the twain.

"I saw them," he heard Mattie reply, to a question asked by her father, the words of which he failed to catch. "There is a messenger expected from headquarters, either to-night or to-morrow. You are to meet them at the old shanty with in an hour. There is work on hand. But mind. You are not to touch a drop of liquor until after you have heard all and reported to me. There must be no mistake in this affair."

"I'll be keeful an' do jest as you say," responded Hark, adding in a tone that grew soft and imploring. "I do wish it was the last! Ef you'd only give it all up, an go away with me whar they wouldn't be any more sech troubles—'pears like I'd be too happy to live! I've had sech bad dreams o' late—dreams o' you an' black trouble a-comin' onto you like a cloud o' death. Less go 'way, gal, afore the wust comes. You're too good for sech a life—"

A short, mocking laugh was the woman's answer, as she sprang lightly to the ground and entered the house. Hark stood gazing after her for a minute, then slowly shaking his head, led the white mustang away to the little low stable back of the cabin.

Simple Simon slowly backed out of his covert and crawled away until safe among the shadows. But his curiosity only seemed whetted by what he had seen and heard. His eyes never left the open door of the stable until Hark Foster came forth and entered the house.

His stay there was not of long duration, and when he emerged, a long rifle was resting in the hollow of his left arm. After a swift glance around, he crossed the little clearing and plunged into the timber.

Simple Simon was still upon the watch, and followed close upon the old hunter's heels. Once more he exercised his skill as a shadow, and great though his curiosity must have been, it was not allowed to override his prudence. He knew what he might expect if he was discovered now; a bit of cold lead as a hint that he was too inquisitive. But this did not deter him. His own shadow could not have followed old Hark any more silently than did this mass of animated rags. With the velvet foot of a cat, Simple Simon seemed to possess its powers of vision, as well. More than once old Hark paused short, glaring around him and sniffing the air as though he suspected the vicinity of an enemy, but as he paused, so did the human shadow; when he advanced, Simple Simon followed, step for step, never losing nor gaining an inch.

The trail was a long and winding one, but at length Hark Foster entered a deep and narrow hollow, along which he hastened with less than his wonted caution, like one who has reached the end of a long journey. So Simple Simon reasoned, and events proved his surmise was correct.

Hark paused and uttered a low, quavering whistle. As by magic the gloom beyond was lighted up by a broad sheet of ruddy light, and the signal was answered. Hark uttered a low grunt of satisfaction and glided forward.

Simple Simon crouched down beneath a bush. He saw three men standing in the light, saw Hark join them, and a moment after the dazzling light vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

"That's the shanty she spoke about, I reckon. Wonder would they take me in ef I was to do that whistle?"

Luckily for himself, Simon was not foolish enough to make the attempt, although, as his actions evinced, he was resolved to find out the mystery shadowed forth by this secret meeting. But how? That was the question.

Not a ray of light was now visible, since the door was closed after Hark Foster, and as Simple Simon silently crawled up to the shanty, passing his hands over the wall, he found that it was perfectly tight, though built of logs. The spaces between the logs had been chinked, then plastered over thickly with mortar that seemed little less solid than stone itself. By pressing his ear to the wall, he could just distinguish a faint murmuring sound, as of far distant voices, but not a word could he catch.

Chafing at the thought of the important information he might be losing, Simple Simon slowly passed around in front of the cabin, searching in vain for some loop-hole. But when he gained the rear of the cabin, he made a glad discovery. A stunted tree grew close to the wall; so close that by its means the roof might be gained with little difficulty. Of course there was a chimney, to carry off the smoke of the rousing fire; would it not also serve to convey the sounds of the words spoken below?

No sooner conceived than carried out. Simple Simon nimbly shinned up the tree and cautiously stepped upon the sloping roof. Inch by inch he worked his way up to the chimney, the bark roof threatening to give way beneath him at every step.

Squatting down, his face as close to the top of the chimney as the smoke would allow, Simple Simon drank in the words which stand recorded here.

"Because he had other work on hand—to quiet down Joe Smith, I believe. He begins to suspect that we are playing double—more for our pockets than for his."

"We kin do without him," and Simple Simon recognized the voice of Mark Foster. "He's too fond o' bossin' an' lettin' us do the dirty work. Who is it that's elected fer this raid?"

"I have their names here, on this list. The Prophet furnished it. We are to go in the old dress, so that, if there is any trouble, and we are seen, it won't be suspected that it is a party affair."

"Who's this they say is comin' up to inspect us?"

"Don't know his name. Somebody the old man has started out to see that we are all ready for hot work when the—"

A huge puff of smoke flew up the chimney and darted full into the eager listener's face, blinding and almost suffocating him, and the remainder of the speech was lost. Worse than that, the eavesdropper felt that *he must sneeze!* He grasped his nose with one hand and closed his lips with the other. He felt as though he was swelling up like a balloon—he fancied he could hear his skin crack as it expanded! There was a curious commotion inside—an internal convulsion that filled his eyes with tears—but the danger was past. The sneeze was strangled in its birth.

To avoid the smoke, Simple Simon crept over the ridge-pole and passed to windward of the chimney. But he fled from Scylla only to fall into the jaws of Charybdis. The rotten bark gave way beneath his feet—he slipped through it—down—down! bringing up in a sitting posture in the very midst of the astonished conspirators!

CHAPTER XVII.

UNEXPECTED AID.

"DON'T want to put ye out a mite, gen'lemen. I'm only Sweet William, jest dropped in to see the fun, sorter permiscuous-like. I'd a heap rather you wouldn't make comp'ny out o' me."

The giant beamed benevolently around upon the astounded faces, nodding good-humoredly to each one in succession. It was a peculiar situation, and one that would have made the fortune of any painter that could catch and fix upon canvas the conflicting emotions so plainly imprinted upon each face.

But Gerald Evans was too eager for his prey to be long at a loss. The weight of numbers was still upon his side, and even if this insolent, meddlesome trapper did attempt to obstruct the course of justice, the struggle could only end in one way. And it might be best—the hour was drawing near when a single champion like this fellow might turn the tide that would dash to pieces the fabric he and his had risked so much to raise. Now—one little morsel of cold lead—if Anderson Gladden was not so uncomfortably strict in his ideas of honor!

The big blue eye of the giant trapper settled upon the face of Gerald Evans, and a cold smile curled his lip as though he read the swift workings of that subtle brain and held it in contempt. At least, thus Evans interpreted that smile, and the evil light deepened in his eyes.

"It seems to me, my good fellow, that you are interfering in matters that do not concern you in the least. Such may be the fashion where you were raised, but civilized beings are apt to grow impatient, when the thing is carried too far."

"Which I suppose is a perlte hint fer me to git up an' git, ain't it?" grinned Sweet William.

Evans bowed, haughtily.

"I knowed it. I sawn the same thing in your eyes when I fust come in. An' more'n that, I saw you was eetchin' all over to send a hunk o' lead to see what grub I ett fer supper. I kin see same thing in your eye now. But ye won't do it. Why? Beca'ye you cain't, even if you darst. I'm bullit-proof. When a fellar shoots at me, the bullit jest bounces back an' putts out his eye. That looks queer, but it's a scan'alous fact. Whar I come from, you'd think they raised one-eyed men from the seed, they was so plenty—the woods was full o' 'em!"

Sweet William beamed cheerfully around upon the dark-faced men, seemingly unconscious that he was playing with fire. So innocent

did he appear that when Anderson Gladden spoke, it was far more gently than he intended.

"Stranger, I reckon you mean well, but we ain't in the humor fer foolin', jest now. You was on the jury with me when that young man was tried. We didn't bring him in guilty, because he run away; but he was found guilty, an' a price set on his head—"

"I know it; an' that's the why I'm settin' yere now. That hundred dollars b'longs to me, individgaly, myself," was the cool response.

"That's the why I came in on ye like a spook makin' a frienly call on his 'lations. I heard you talkin' 'bout massacreein' him, which'd make more work fer me. I ain't lazy, but he kin walk to jestice easier on his own legs than on mine."

"Then you mean to lay claim—"

"I mean that yender two-legged critter is my huckleberry. I mean that I sot out to look fer him, an' I found him, an' tuck him pris'ner the night o' the same day the price was set onto his head. I mean that he's my meat, an' anybody what 'spects to take him, hes got to crawl up my back fust—amen!"

"It is a lie—a plot to cheat justice!" cried Evans, his black eyes filled with a devilish fury.

Sweet William did not beam benevolently now. His huge frame seemed to swell and dilate, his blue eyes glittered like a polished steel mirror, his voice trembled with smothered anger as he spoke:

"They's a lady here, or I'd jest shut my hand onto ye an' squish ye like I would a buzzin', pesterin' fly. No man ever give me the lie twicet, nur kin a little runt like you. Say it ag'in, an' lady or no lady, I'm down on ye."

"One thing at a time," said Evans, with a strange, sickly smile but which was not born of fear. "I came to arrest that outlaw, and arrest him I will, though a score of your stripe stood between. After that, I'll prove my words how, when and where you please."

"I'll do even better'n that," and as he spoke, the strange smile deepened upon the face of Sweet William. "I'll prove you a liar right here an' now. You swear that you'll arrest that young feller; I swear you won't do nuthin' o' the kind. Instead, you'll tell him to skin out o' this jest as soon as he wants. An' ef any o' your frinds tries to stop him, you'll fight fer him ag'inst them."

An angry curse broke from the lips of Evans.

"We are fools to listen to this madman's prate. If he has not sense enough to clear the way, down with him!"

As he spoke, Gerald Evans raised his revolver, but before he could cover his man, Sweet William flung up his hand.

It was empty; there was no weapon in it. But if there had been—if a bullet had crashed through his brain, Evans could not have paused more quickly. His face turned ghastly white, and he trembled in every limb.

"Who—who are you?" he gasped, in a strained, husky voice, his eyes wildly protruding.

"Your master!" came the deep-toned answer, and, like an avenging god, the giant stood erect, towering head and shoulders above the trembling wretch. "You have raised your hand against my life, and you know the penalty. True, you knew me not; that fact will save you, if you prove true to your oath now."

"To you—but not to *him*!" and the evil glance shot at Leo, told that though crushed, the snake was not killed.

"To him, as to me; look and be convinced."

At the words, Leo Friend raised his hand and made a swift sign. Evans stared as though unwilling to believe his eyesight. With a smile, Leo repeated the sign, adding to it another. Its effect was no less strange than when used by Sweet William, for, still holding his revolver cocked, Evans stepped to the side of the giant trapper and confronted his late allies.

"Three ag'in' three—not countin' in the lady!" chuckled Sweet William, once more the uncouth trapper. "Jest touch 'em up, boss," to Evans.

"Mr. Gladden," said Evans, speaking in a cold, forced manner, "I am sorry to say that we have been in the wrong here. This man cannot be arrested. He must be let go free, when and where he wills. You alone are not in the secret. The rest of us, one and all, are bound by the most solemn oaths to protect Mr. Friend even to the death. I earnestly beg that you will not attempt to interfere."

Gladden was too much bewildered to make any answer, and before he could collect his scattered senses, Sidney Rigdon exclaimed:

"There's no time to lose! The Vigilantes may be here at any moment!"

"You did this?" and Sweet William glowered upon Evans.

"I did; but I didn't know then—"

"You know *now*. What word did you send?"

"That I was going to arrest Leo Friend at this place; for them to make all haste—"

"They're coming now!" cried Rigdon, from the door. "I can hear their horses' hoofs coming down the road!"

"We'll hev to borry your boss critters, then. Tell 'em we broke loose—you kin shoot an' yell all you like, but mind whar you're sending your lead. Come, Leo."

There was indeed no time to be lost. The Vigilantes were rapidly approaching, and once in their hands, Leo's fate was assuredly sealed.

Pressing one warm kiss upon the cold lips of his heart's love, the young man darted out of the house after his huge friend. A moment later and they were racing swiftly down the moonlighted road.

Right well the others played their part. Yelling and shouting, they emptied their pistols, as though the escape had been against their will. All but one shot spent their force upon the harmless ground or trees; when that shot was fired a man's white face glared swiftly around as though in dread of some unseen power's avenging the treacherous deed.

A sharp cry escaped from Leo's lips, and when Sweet William glanced quickly around, he saw the red blood flow over the hand that was pressed to the young man's side. A fierce oath was coupled with the name of Gerald Evans, and his strong arm was extended to support his companion.

"It's only a scratch," said Leo, with a faint smile. "If it don't bleed too much—"

"Squeeze it tight; I'll 'tend to the critter; we can't stop now," muttered the giant, as the fierce yells of the Vigilantes proclaimed their discovery.

Leo obeyed, though he felt faint and sick. As well die in the saddle as to yield now. Anything but the shameful rope.

At full speed the chase swept on. The fugitives were well mounted, but the Vigilantes were no less so. Their horses were the pick of the country, and their pride urged them on. This outlawed assassin should not escape them twice.

Each moment increased the anxiety of Sweet William. For himself he cared little. He could have taken to the woods and laughed the most persistent pursuit to scorn. But incumbered with a wounded—perhaps dying—man, whom he was resolved not to desert—that was more serious.

He urged the horses to their utmost speed, until they seemed to fairly fly. He glanced back. He was gaining, but oh! so slowly. He saw that Leo was growing weaker and unsteady in the saddle. Could he bear up long enough? Impossible!

Satisfied that speed alone could not save them, Sweet William left the main road and plunged into a narrow, winding bridge-path, along which he pressed at breakneck speed for over a mile, before he drew rein.

Leaping to the ground, he caught Leo in one arm, then struck the horses furiously with the flat of his hand. As they dashed madly on, he plunged into the timber, making his way at a rapid trot, up the hollow.

For full an hour he pressed on without flagging, for, by the yells of the Vigilantes, almost immediately after his leaving the horses, he knew that his ruse was suspected. But even his iron frame required rest, and he halted in a deep, vine-covered ravine, both for breath and to make sure that Leo was still alive. He was, though breathing but faintly. Sweet William dared not strike a light, but guided by his ear, he groped his way to a small spring that bubbled over the mossy rocks above. Filling his flask, he cautiously crept back, feeling with his hands for the senseless body of the young man.

He touched a face—it was as cold as marble—the face of a dead man! He started back, with a shudder—only to trip and fall at full length over a second body!

What den of horrors had he stumbled into?"

CHAPTER XVIII.

A BITTER POTION.

WITH yells of angry excitement the Vigilantes sped past the little log cabin and thundered down the road in hot pursuit of the fleeing refugees. They were watched with strangely varying sensations by the little group beside the stile-blocks, but there was a feeling of general relief as the last lagging horseman disappeared around the bend in the road.

Anderson Gladden was the first to break the almost painfully oppressive silence that had fallen over them since the confused clattering of hoofs died away in the distance.

"Belle, child, go to your room; not to bed, beca'ye I want to say a few words to you, afore long. You gentlemen, come 'long o' me. By the tree yender, we kin have a quiet smoke while we're talkin'."

Not the words, but something peculiar in the giant's tone, caused the three worthies to interchange covert glances, almost of uneasiness. The rude settler spoke more like a master than a slave.

"It'll save trouble," he added, as the trio hesitated. "Come—unless you'd prefer me to ax you the questions afore the crowd at the next meetin'."

"Lead on," said Gerald Evans, his voice sharp and disagreeable. "As well now as any time; only remember. You pressed the matter to a crisis—not I."

"It's time one of us did, nur it don't matter much which, I reckon," was the dry response. "I've bin workin' in the dark long a-plenty, an'

afore I take another step for'ard, you've got to make the trail clear an' broad afore me."

"What is it that so puzzles your keen wits?"

"Two points in petickler," said Gladden, ignoring the sneering tones of Evans. "First, we'll take what jest happened. You all three both on ye hunted Leo Friend down like as ef he was a p'izen wolf. 'Twas through your doin's, more'n anythin' else, that he was brung in guilty by the Vigilantys. They was a price set on his head, an' you hinted that I could mebberake it in, by takin' to the timber a'ter him. I didn't do this, fer reasons which don't matter to nobody but myself. I wouldn't hunt fer him, but when I met him by chainece, I tuck him up, as I was in duty bound, bein' a law-abidin' citizen. I sent word to you, which I knowed you held a reg'lar warrant fer his arrest. You come an' tempted to arrest him, pulled a pistol onto him, which showed that you really meant to take him prisoner. You could 'a' done it, even a'ter that other feller tuck a hand in the game. What I want to know is, why didn't you do it?"

"You saw him make those signs? First Sweet William and then the other?"

Gladden nodded, slowly.

"Did you understand the meaning they conveyed? Do you belong to any secret order?"

"No," was the short response.

"Well, I—and these gentlemen also—do. Those signs claimed a protection that I could not refuse. If you were a Freemason, you would understand; since you are not, I can only say that if my bitterest enemy was to make that signal, even though his hands were at that moment dripping with the heart's-blood of my father and mother, I could not refuse him the aid he demanded. Had you resisted, we would have joined them against you, even to death."

"You give up the hunt ag'in' him—Leo—then?" slowly uttered Gladden. "You will help him whenever he is in need, if it comes in your power? You're bound to risk your life in defense o' his'n?"

"I am bound by a solemn oath to do all that, and more, if possible," replied Evans.

"An' yet I saw you shoot at him jest now—*an' shoot to kill!*" sharply added the giant.

"I fired the same as you did—in the air, simply to disarm suspicion—"

"Your weepen was aimed pint blank at Leo Friend, an' your lead struck him. I see him jump in the saddle when you pulled trigger. Thar—don't make it blacker by denyin' the truth. I kin trust my own eyes."

"If you are so anxious to quarrel with me—"

"Cool an' easy; don't kick afore you're pricked. When I make up my mind to quarrel with a man, he don't need to ax the question. I'm jest tellin' you this to let you all know that I've got my eyes open, an' that I mean to play out the rest o' the game with them open, too. You've led me by the nose long enough. We'll come to a fair an' squar' understandin' this night, which'll settle whether you three are honest men or cunning rogues—"

"You use hard words, brother Gladden," hastily said Sidney Rigdon, checking by a firm grasp the angry explosion that rose to the lips of Joseph Smith. "You must justify yourself, if we are to remain friends and allies."

"Whar is the treasure you promised to show me? Whar is the gold and silver and precious stones, which he said he saw through that sacred stone o' his'n? You made me kill the best ram of all my flock. You made me dig like a nigger in the dirt—an' for what? To turn up a p'izen rattlesnake hid in a box—to be struck in the face by it, an' escape a turrible death as by a merricle—to be knocked on the head an' pounded out o' my senses by them as you hid in the bushes to play ghosts an' spooks onto me—"

"Stop!" and the long arm of the Prophet was uplifted, his gaunt form rigidly erect, his deep, sunken eyes blazing with a somber fire as he spoke. "You are uttering foul blasphemy that will drag your soul to perdition if you do not repent your hasty judgment. You are—"

Again Sidney Rigdon interposed.

"I am the only one to blame, brother Gladden. You cannot have forgotten the warning given you—that utter silence must be preserved until the treasure was safely removed beyond the magic circle. I knew, like yourself, that the evil spirits of darkness would surround us and endeavor to cheat us of our prize; I knew that those strange voices and diabolical sounds were but devices to frighten us, that they proceeded from bodiless shapes that could not injure us as long as our courage bid them defiance. I was armed against all that—but when the rattlesnake sounded, though I knew that it was but an empty sound—I could not command my nerves, and cried aloud with horror. That gave the enemy power over us. We were no longer proof against their arts, and knowing this, we fled, thinking that you were with us."

"But the money," persisted Gladden; whar did it go?"

"The evil spirit took possession of it, and coiled himself up in its place, assuming the guise of a serpent. Only your stout heart was proof against fear he would have claimed you then and there, and dragged you down with him to the bottomless depths of perdition."

"An' another devil give me this black eye, I s'pose?" added the giant, with a short, skeptical laugh.

"Be thankful that you escaped so easily," earnestly responded Rigdon. "I could tell you facts concerning unfortunate treasure-seekers that would cause your hair to stand on end—"

"You needn't mind," the giant bluntly inter-

posed. "I don't keer about hearin' 'em. Fact is, I've hearn too p'izen much talk about merricles, an all that you kin do. Ef it's all the same to you I'll jest wait ontel you've brung some on 'em to pass afore I go any fuder. Show me some o' the gold you've dug out o' the airth by means o' that wonderful stone an' then I'll b'lieve what you say about its powers; not afore."

"You will be sorry for this when you have had time for sober reflection, brother Gladden," said Rigdon, in a meek tone of voice, but at the same time checking the Prophet's passion once more. "We will leave you now. When we meet again may the sinful scales have fallen from your eyes, and you be able to see the lamentable error into which you have fallen."

If the part the Prophet and Sidney Rigdon played in this interview seem inconsistent with their usually sharp, overbearing mode of procedure, the reader must bear in mind that their cause was in a very critical state at that juncture. The storm was then brewing that was to sweep them and their pernicious doctrines from Missouri soil, and past experience had taught them to read aright the low but ominous mutterings of the gathering tempest. The countenance and aid of one man of influence might turn the scale in their favor. They could not afford to lose the good will of Anderson Gladden. Hence their unwonted humility.

The giant settler watched the precious couple until they disappeared amid the shadows beyond the stile, then turned toward Gerald Evans, who stood in silence, his eyes bent moodily upon the ground.

"Waal, why don't you keep your two fri'nds comp'ny?" and there was a scarcely veiled sneer in the query.

It was not this though, that gave birth to the strange, glowing light in Gerald's eyes as they were raised to meet the settler's gaze. There was far more of the master than the dove in his demeanor and voice as he made reply:

"Plain speaking seems to be the rule, to-night, and as you've had your turn at the one, suppose you try a little sober listening while I talk."

"If you've got anythin' to say that's wuth listenin' to," was the careless response. "How long'll it take you?"

"That depends in a great measure upon you. Only a few minutes, if you are reasonable; an hour, if you prove as obstinate as heretofore."

"We'll go to the house, then, an' take it easy. 'Tain't alays I feel like runnin' my own cance, but this night is one o' them times. You'd do better to wait for a day when the signs is more favorable. I say it as a fri'nd."

"You are very kind, but I have waited long enough, and prefer to speak out now, once for all."

Gladden made no reply, but turning, led the way to the log-cabin. Entering, he snuffed the tallow dip with his fingers, then, nodding to Gerald to be seated, set the example by drawing his chair up to the table, filling his pipe and lighting it by means of the flickering candle.

"Smoke?" he uttered, pushing a pipe and the box of home-made tobacco toward his companion.

Gerald flung out his hand, impatiently, the fire burning more deeply in his eyes. The two men had apparently changed dispositions for the time being. Gladden was cool, even sarcastic, while Evans was strangely restless, despite his evident attempt at composure.

"How much longer is this going to last?" he exclaimed, leaning forward, his glowing eyes fixed upon the giant, who placidly rumbled, through the misty smoke wreath:

"You want to shoot nearer the mark then that, if you expect a answer. I ain't guessin' riddles."

"You can understand easily enough if you only wanted to; but so be it, then! If you want plain talk—when am I to marry Belle?"

"Whenever you an' she makes it up an' fixes on the day, I reckon," but though the words set down were spoken quietly enough, the smoke-puffs came quicker and more dense.

Gerald Evans laughed shortly, wickedly.

"Just what I expected of you, Anderson Gladden; but that won't satisfy me. I ask you a plain question—and one that you knew must come—and you've got to give me a plain answer. Ours was a regular bargain, a purely business transaction. I was to introduce you to Joseph Smith and get you into his good graces. In addition I was to insure you a share in his treasure-seeking. You were to aid me with the girl—to give her to me for a wife. I have faithfully performed my part of the bargain, but how is it with you? I claim your promise. Give me Belle—"

"Easy, fri'nd," interrupted Gladden, laying down his pipe and leaning over the table. "You're gettin' ahead o' your swath. Part you

say I own is correct; but whar is my share o' the treasure? What better off am I then I was afore? A black eye, a snake-bite; no more!"

"You got more than the rest of us, then. But all that has nothing to do with this business. I performed my part of the contract; and you've got to be as good."

"An' ef you say I hain't, I say you lie! Bah! don't bristle up your feathers at me. What I say I mean, an' I kin prove every word. I said I'd putt in a good word fer you; an' so I hev. I've told Belle that you was my choice fer her, an' said I'd never agree she should marry anybody else."

"But what have you done? Talk is cheap. What I ask—and what I will have—is action. Your tongue says do this; your face tells her to suit herself. That won't satisfy me. You must compel her to obey, if she is obstinate—"

"That'll do," said Gladden, sternly, as he arose from his chair. "You want an answer, once for all, an' a answer you shall have."

Turning, he left the room, soon after making his appearance, leading the maiden by the hand. Pausing beside the table, his eyes fixed upon Gerald Evans, who had arisen from his chair when Belle entered, he spoke:

"Ef I make any mistake, you want to tell me whar I'm wrong. I told you I'd speak a good word fer you with my daughter, here. I said I'd tell her I'd rather she would marry you than any other man livin'. I promised to keep you afore her mind, an' never miss a chainece to show you up in a good light, an' do all I could to make her take you fer her husband. I think this is what I promised. Hev I forgotten anythin'?"

Gerald Evans bowed; he did not dare trust his tongue to reply. This movement was so unexpected that, for the moment, he was wholly at a loss how to act.

"Very good. Now, Belle, tell him whether I hain't kept my word to the very letter. Hain't I dinged at you ontel you couldn't rest?"

"Until I was sick of the very sound of his name—yes!"

"All right. What I said at all them times, I say now. I hope you'll marry him—I think he'll make a good husband; an' the sooner all this p'izen nonsense is at an end an' done with, the better I'll be pleased! And now, Gerald Evans, putt the question to her yourself. Ax her to set the day fer you two to git married. You swore you'd hev your answer this night, an' now I hope you'll git it!"

"I'll save him that trouble, father," and there was a faint suspicion of a smile upon the pale face of the maiden as she spoke. "If he was the last man upon earth, I would die before I would marry him. I have told him this, more than once, but common politeness is thrown away upon one who persists in a pursuit after being plainly told that it is unwelcome. In hopes that he will believe me this time, I add that I loathe and despise him beyond all earthly reptiles!"

Gerald Evans's countenance was a study during this brief but cuttingly decisive speech. Confusion and even shame were written thereon at first; but these faded away before hot rage that momentarily threatened an explosion. When the maiden ended, his face was pale as death. His eyes were glowing like those of an irritated serpent, while his thin lip curled away from his white teeth in a sneering smile of devilish rage.

His voice was low and strained as he spoke:

"Many thanks for your candor, lady. Believe me, it is fully appreciated, and will be repaid in full, in good time. I accept this man's permission. I humbly acknowledge my love, and beg that you will marry me."

"And I, quite as humbly, refuse the honor," laughed Belle.

"You will change your mind, I am sure. You will marry me within one week from to-night. If not—"

"If not?" haughtily echoed the maiden.

"You will see your father hanging upon the gallows—"

With a deep, angry cry, Gladden sprang forward, and grasping Gerald, flung him headlong through the open doorway, then, pistol in hand, stood awaiting the result.

Evans, cat-like, regained his feet, brushing the dirt and blood from his eyes, but made no attempt to draw a weapon.

"Remember!" he hissed. "I know where your father is, and he shall die the death of a dog, upon the gallows!"

Gladden raised his pistol, but Belle hung upon his arm until the darkness swallowed up the rash speaker.

"Better hev let me shoot the imp, girl," muttered Gladden, closing and barring the door.

"He was so mad he didn't know what he was saying. You have done nothing—the idea! Hang you—"

"He didn't mean me, pet," and he spoke, the giant settler looked with loving wistfulness down into her face.

"But he—he said my father?" persisted Belle.

"Yes, he said your father," and the strong arm stole around her form and drew her close to his broad breast. "But, darling, I—I ain't your true father!"

CHAPTER XIX.

A CUNNING SIMPLETON.

Down through the treacherous roof, clutching in vain at the crumbling edges of the rotten shingles, from darkness into light, bringing up in a sitting posture upon the stout puncheon floor in the midst of a half-dozen rough, disreputable fellows, armed to the teeth.

Warned by the crackling bark above their heads, the conspirators had barely time to spring or roll aside when the grotesque figure of Simple Simon descended from the upper regions. Of them all, Hark Foster was the coolest and quickest witted. With a cat-like leap he reached the side of the door, covering it with one pistol, while the other hand commanded the hole in the roof and the fallen spy.

Simple Simon saw this, and more. He saw that death threatened him upon every side, that a dozen pistols and half as many knives were ready to drain his veins, if the word was given, or if he should make a suspicious movement.

He made no attempt to arise or change his position, simply stretched out his hand and picked up a still smoking pipe which had been dropped by some one of the startled conspirators. Coolly ramming the loosened tobacco down into the bowl, he gripped the stem betwixt his teeth and cast his lack-luster eyes slowly around the room, saluting each one of the wondering ruffians with a short, pointed puff of smoke.

"A Quaker meetin', I reckon? You fellers was talkin' lively enough long's I stayed up thar on the ruff, a-listenin' to ye—"

The drawling utterance came to an abrupt cessation, as the big blue eyes came in turn to the person of old Hark Foster. Both of his pistols were now covering the intruder, and his evil black eyes were glancing wickedly along the leveled tubes. An ounce more of pressure upon the triggers and the death-knell would be sounded.

"You don't want to be so pizen keardless, old man," and the fishy-looking blue eyes of Simple Simon underwent a truly remarkable change, seeming to pierce Hark Foster through and through. "Ef one o' them barkers was to go off, it'd kill at both ends. Let up on it."

"You've been listenin'—you hearn what we've been talkin' about?" demanded the old man, in a low, grating tone of voice that was peculiarly impressive.

"Right you air," was the prompt reply. "I'd 'a' hearn more, only fer the con-damned smoke. The idea o' makin' a fire on sech a warm night—"

"You didn't come here alone? You've got some fr'ends outside?" interrupted Foster. "You needn't try to lie—"

"It's you that's doin' the lyin' when you say that I didn't come alone, fer I did. You six feller-critters is the only fr'ends I know of in these parts."

"So much the wuss fer you, then. But of you was backed up by a thousan', you don't git out o' this afore we're satisfied fer why an' what you've come. Now you want to hold up your han's, an' I won't ax ye twice, nuther. Jake Ramsel, you go through him fer weepens."

Fool Simon was sensible enough to realize the utter folly of resisting this blunt command, and promptly elevated both hands above his head, while the man indicated by name glided behind him and removed the weapons from his belt, then "went through" his pockets in the most approved style, dropping the articles thus obtained in a pile upon the floor between Hark Foster and his captive.

"Hevin' things all your own way, ain't ye, boys?" the latter grinned, as, his task completed, Ramsel fell back to his old position. "Howsumever, I reckon this foolishin's gone 'bout fer enough. Tongue's good fer talkin', but fingers is better, when they kin say what mine does. How d'y' like it, boys?"

As he spoke, his uplifted hands were put in motion, and the fingers made the same swift signs that had stood Sweet William and Leo Friend in such good stead barely an hour before. Nor was the result less remarkable in this case. Hark Foster lowered his pistols with a sharp cry of astonishment, while his comrades stared at Simple Simon as though unable to believe the evidence of their own eyes.

Fool Simon grinned broadly around the circle, between the puffs of his pipe, for he felt that he held the game in his own hands. None of those present would dare dispute the authority of those significant signs.

But all was not so serene as he imagined. Hark Foster was not one to be easily choked off from what he deemed an honest prize, and that he was far from being satisfied in the present case was easily read in the sour expression of his withered face.

"You've got the signs all right, an' I don't deny but what we're all bound in duty to respect an' obey them as makes 'em. But thar's two sides to the question. You've got the signs, but how did you git them? By listenin' down chimbley, as you was doin' jest now? You're a clean stranger to all on us. You come down through the ruff, 'stead o' by the doorway. Ef we look on ye sorter dub'ous-like, they's nobody to blame but your own self."

"That is all right, Hark Foster," and as he

dropped his pipe, Fool Simon put aside the drawl and vacant look of the half-wit, speaking clear and rapidly, the man of action all over. "From what I have heard of you, I should have been greatly disappointed had you accepted me without further investigation. Give me your hand and satisfy yourself."

The old man grasped the proffered hand, and, as his secret grips were correctly answered, one after the other, his faintest doubt fled, and he listened to the words of Simple Simon with an air of the most respectful attention.

"And now I am ready to explain my reasons for acting as I have," said Simple Simon, resuming his seat, refilling and lighting a pipe. "In the first place, you all know that there is a big job on hand, though you haven't been told exactly what it is. Word was sent you from head-quarters, down the river, to prepare for hot work. The same messenger told you that the general would, in a few days, send a man up here to inspect the members of this section, with a view to weeding out the untrustworthy, and to tell the faithful just what was intended to be done. I am the messenger intrusted with that double duty."

"Since word was sent you we have learned that there is at least one traitor among your number here, and my final orders were, before all else, to learn who that traitor was. For this reason I came in disguise, accompanied by men enough to carry out whatever orders I might give them. I was warned not to trust any man, without first thoroughly proving him. For this reason I have closely followed and watched you six men, and it was to remove the last, lingering doubt that I listened to-night upon this roof."

"I feel that I can trust you, and now tell you that there is work for you to do, in the interests of the family. I am almost sure who is the traitor, but he will be far more apt to betray himself among his old friends than with strangers like myself and men. I have my plans almost perfected, and when the time comes I depend upon you six men to aid me in carrying them out."

"Jest breathe his name an' he won't make no more trouble in the family," said Foster, in a low, deadly tone.

"You will know it in good time. Until I give you the word you must keep close guard over your tongues and faces. The man I suspect you all trust as with your lives, and he would probably be the very first you would think of confiding with what I have told you. So, I repeat, *trust nobody*. Don't even talk the matter over between yourselves, for the traitor is cunning and sly as a snake."

At that moment no man upon earth had a more devout believer than Simple Simon had in Hark Foster. The smooth and plausible tongue had made a warm convert in the cunning old fox, who would have been the first to resent any hint that Simon was other than exactly what he represented himself to be. That worthy saw this at a glance, and smiled inwardly at the sudden change his words had effected.

He was fated to witness another no less sudden change in the same person.

The faint but unmistakable clink of an iron-shod hoof against a stone came to their ears from without, and immediately after could be distinguished the rapid, heavy trampling of human feet, as a number of men apparently surrounded the hut.

Instinctively Simon cast a glance upward at the broken roof. The light from the fireplace was shining through the aperture, and reflected upon the boughs of the tree, by the aid of which he had gained the roof, served as a beacon to those night-rovers without.

A heavy hand struck the door, and a stern voice cried:

"Open—in the name of the law!"

At the first sound of the betraying hoof-stroke the ferret-eyes of Hark Foster had sought the face of Simple Simon, and his lulled suspicions were aroused by the strange expression therein. He glided noiselessly to the man's side, and, as the summons to open came, Simon turned with a start to meet the fiery glitter of the old man's eyes, to feel the hard muzzle of a pistol pressed against his ribs, and to hear the hissing whisper in his ear:

"Ef you hev sold us I'll kill you, by —!"

Without a word Simple Simon stepped forward, and, removing the fastenings, flung the door wide open. For a moment there was a breathless silence. The seven men within the hut could distinguish nothing but intense gloom without. Five of their number were cowering close to the wall, as though expecting a death-shot from out the darkness, a hang-dog looking set, whom no one could mistake for honest men. Hark Foster was partially behind the door, his eyes riveted upon Simple Simon, a drawn pistol in readiness to carry out his threat. Of them all, Simon alone boldly faced the unseen peril.

The next moment a tall, dark-robed figure stepped into the flood of light, and addressed Simon.

"We are searching for Leo Friend; have you seen him anywhere to-night?"

"I hain't—hev any o' you, boys?"

As from one voice came the unanimous response in the negative.

"We thought he might be here when we saw the light," added the Vigilante. "Remember, he is condemned to death, a price set upon his head. Any man who harbors him, or gives him aid in any shape or form, will be deemed guilty of a serious offense, and be treated accordingly."

Without another word he and his fellows faded away amid the gloom, and then the sounds of their horses' hoofs were heard going down the hollow.

"I ax your pardon, boss," and Foster hung his head in sullen sheepishness as he spoke. "I thought you was playin' double on us. I'll know better next time."

"Your motives were good, and I take no offense. On the contrary, it rather pleases me to find one so ready to avenge treachery. You and I will get along finely, I fancy. Now, one word of business. Arrange a place of meeting for to-morrow, as we can't talk any more here, at present. Who knows who may be watching us? Those black rascals were far too polite not to mean mischief."

"It was all fixed afore you came in," muttered Hark. "We've got a job laid out fer to-morrow night. The boys understand jest what they've got to do."

"Very well. Then we may as well say good-night."

"You must go 'long o' me, boss," said Foster, respectfully, but firmly. "Thar's a good deal to talk over, an' some few points I want you to clear up. We'll be safe to say what we want up to my shanty."

Simple Simon hesitated, but there was something in the steady gaze of the old man that decided him to comply, which he did, with a good grace, in outward seeming, at least.

The party separated, Simple Simon following his host. Not a word was spoken on the way, and an hour later they stood before the log house.

Before Foster could knock, the door opened and a lithe form slipped out and past them. It was Mattie Foster, and she bore a cocked pistol in her hand.

"Go in, father, and you, sir, please follow him," she uttered, in a clear, metallic voice that produced a far from pleasant impression upon Simple Simon.

As Foster obeyed without any remark, he did the same. Mattie brought up the rear, stopping to bar and chain the door, though all was dark as death. This done, she sounded a shrill whistle, and Nancy, the servant girl, immediately appeared with a light, revealing Mattie leaning against the door, covering Simple Simon with a cocked pistol.

"What on airth do you mean, gal?" demanded Foster.

"I mean that you have been deceived—that yonder wretch is a treacherous spy, who, in seeking to entrap us, has come to his own death!"

CHAPTER XX.

A PAGE FROM THE PAST.

BELLE staggered back, confused, bewildered, unable to believe the evidence of her ears. A sad, pained smile passed over Anderson Gladden's face, then left it darker, more gloomy than before.

"No, I ain't gone crazy, nur yit I ain't drunk," he said, with a short, uneasy laugh. "You'd hev to larn the truth some time, an' I reckon this is good's any other time fer makin' a clean breast of it. Set down, Belle—it's along story, an' not the most agreeablest, nuther, fer a young an' tender thing like you to listen to."

The maiden obeyed, mechanically, sinking into a chair, her dazed eyes following the motions of the man who denied being her father, although, since her earliest recollection, he had accepted and seemed proud of the title. It was like a strange, unnatural dream—a nightmare from which she longed to awaken.

Anderson Gladden closed and barred the door and drew the cloth curtain over the one window of the room. This done, he took a seat beside the table, filling and lighting his pipe.

"It's the gospel truth, though the good Lord knows how I wish it was a lie," were the first words he uttered, his voice unsteady and husky, despite his efforts to the contrary.

"I ain't your sure-enough father, child, though I've tried to be as good as the best to ye, an' I kin honestly say that they never was a father as loved his child with a truer heart-love then I hev given you, from the day when you was putt in my arms, a teenty-weenty little cooin' crowin' baby."

"You have—you are my father—I have known no other parent but you," sobbed Belle, sinking at his knees and pressing her cold cheek against his horny, trembling hand. "Do not say any more. Let me forget it all, if I can. We were so happy—so contented—"

"I would ef I could, little 'un," and the big, bushy beard was mingled with the soft, brown hair, as his pipe dropped unheeded to the floor. "But the words has bin said, an' you'd never be the same gal ag'in, even ef I wasn't to say no more. I alays 'lowed to tell you, some day,

but I kep' puttin' it off an' off, tell it got harder an' harder to own that you wasn't my own flesh an' blood. It's better that you learn the truth from me, then to hev the blackest side putt afore ye by some sech p'izen critter as that Gerald Evans. Thank the Lord! I found him out afore it was too late!"

"Then he—my father," the word coming out with a painful effort, "he is alive."

"I'm afeard not," was the slow response. "Though why I should say afeard, when mebbe it would be a blessin' to know that he was dead—but it ain't fer me to jedge him. He was your father anyway."

"Tell me—I can bear the truth better than suspense. Better from you than any one else. You will be just, I know," said Belle, in a tone of forced composure.

"I never liked him, even from the fust day we met," said Gladden, his big eyes filled with a far-away look, as though reading the black past; "yit I don't think he was anybody's enemy but his own. He was a Englishman, young, well l'arned, an' han'some as a pictur' both in face an' figur'. He was runnin' round fer amusement, he said; come over the big waters to hunt an' fish, but he never went no funder west than our house. The scenery, he said; but we all soon knowed that it was my sister Nell—she who was a'terward your mother, little 'un."

"Then you are my uncle?" and the red lips were pressed tenderly against the giant's brown paw.

"Yes; a uncle by birth, but a father in love. Durn the smokel it somehow gits in my eyes ontel I can't see cl'ar! Never mind—it's gettin' late, an' they's a good deal to tell. Ef you only won't speak—somehow it makes me fergit what I want to say."

"Next to you, little 'un, I never loved any woman like I did your mother. That makes it harder to say what I'm goin' to, but you must hear the hull truth, or you wouldn't understan' jest how it all come to pass."

"We was all very proud of Nell, but I know now that she looked down us, an' felt herself 'way above us. We was plain, rough back-woods people, while she was a fine lady. Some rich 'lations tuck her an' raised her like one o' themselves, givin' her a fine education an' all that. She used to visit us every year, but each time she come, 'peared like we was still funder apart. What she said was law to us. Morther, father an' all, was like slaves to her, and she knowed it, only too well."

"It was while Nell was on one o' these visits that he come—Wilfred Hastings, his name was. He an' Nell got on wonderfully well together, seein' they was both so well brung up, an' both knowed so much; better then one would think, whar both was so proud an' high-spirited."

"We might 'a' knowed what the end would be, but we was blind to it all, until it was too late to interfere. Father an' mother both said no, when he axed us would we let 'em git married, but Nell carried the day, as she al'ays did, once she got her mind onto anythin'."

"They was married, but not from our house. It wasn't fine enough for Nell. Our 'lations in Boston writ on fer her to come an' git married from thar house, an' she went. Mother was sick, an' so none of us went. Father couldn't an' I wouldn't—I hated him so bad."

"They went to England to live. The first two or three letters from Nell was bright an' cheery enough, but then we could see that they was somethin' troublin' her. I wanted to go over to find out what the trouble was, but we was poor, an' afore I could scrape together money enough it was all over. I'll tell it jest as it happened, though it was a long time afore we knowed the hull truth."

"Fer a year—ontel jest afore you was born—Hastings was a good husband, treatin' Nell like she was a queen, but then he got into bad company. He went from bad to worse, until it'd be weeks at a time that Nell never see his face, or heard of him, only through that kind o' friends as takes delight in makin' bad enough wuss, by carryin' all sorts o' stories, not bein' too keerful as to whether they were lies or not."

"He tuck to drinkin' an' to gamblin' too heavy fer even his long puss. Everybody said he was goin' to the devil as fast as he could, but the end came even sooner than his wust enemies thought fer."

"It was one night at his club. A party hed bin playin' keerds for two days an' that was the second night at a stretch, only stoppin' to eat an' drink an' mebbe ketch a wink or two o' sleep. Your father an' a man named Stephens was pardners, an' luck stood by 'em pritty constant, until nobody else could be found to play ag'inst 'em. I don't know how many thousand pounds they'd won, but it was a monstrous big amount. Not satisfied, an' each one on 'em thinkin' he was the best player, they turned to an' played ag'in' each other."

"Luck set dead ag'inst your father, an' he lost game a'ter game. He was well-nigh crazy with drink, an' bet turrible high; but it wasn't no use. He was cleaned out, an' lost every cent he was wuth in the world an' more too. Then, crazy with his losses, he accused Stephens of cheatin'. Quick as a flash, Stephens smashed a

big glass decanter over your father's head. Friends interfered, an' parted 'em, but not afore your father swore he'd murder the lyin' cheat. Those words told heavy ag'in' him in the end."

"Airly the next mornin', Stephens was found dead in the street—murdered an' robbed, an' afore noon, your father was arrested fer the crime."

"But he was innocent!" impulsively cried Belle.

"I hope—I b'lieve he was," slowly responded Gladden. "Ef he did it at all, it was when he was crazy with drink an' his losses. But everythin' was ag'inst him. They found some of the checks in his pockets, an' his hands an' clothes was spotted with blood. An' layin' on the floor o' his room was a bloody knife, which was marked with his name, an' jest sech a weapon as the doctors swore the dead man was killed with."

"It'd take too long to go over the hull trial; one or two points 'll do. The two men who started to help your father home after the fuss at the club rooms, swore that when they was about half-way, he turned on them, an' bein' a big, stout man, made crazy by what had happened, beat 'em off an' threatened to knife 'em ef they bothered him any more. They swore he drew that same knife on them, ontel, in fear o' thar lives, they left him alone. That an' the rest was enough, an' he was shet up to stan' his trial."

"This much we heard from your mother, who brung us the first news herself. I told you afore that she was awful proud an' high-spirited. She never doubted his guilt, an' takin' you, then less'n a year old, come home at once. It killed her. She didn't live a month a'ter she come back to us."

"On her death-bed she putt you in my arms an' made me swear I would raise you as my own child, give you my name, an' never tell you a word about your father. I kept my word in the fust part, an' would fer the rest only fer what happened here to-night."

"You have been father and mother—all in one!" murmured Belle, through her painful sobbing.

"On the day she was buried," Gladden resumed, speaking rapidly, as though fearing to trust his feelings further. "On the day she was buried I got a paper that told the rest about your father. It was a old paper, an' I chanced upon it by accident. He was never brung to trial, fer he escaped, jist how nobody 'peared to know. In the same paper thar was a piece which told of a dead body bein' found in the river which was thought to be his'n, but the fishes hed been at it an' they couldn't be sure."

"As nothin' more was said about it an' as he never made any attempt to find you or her, I grew to believe the body found was really his'n. I never dreamed different ontel that p'izen critter said what he did to-night."

"Then you think he—he is still living?"

"I don't know what to think," and Gladden thoughtfully rubbed the tip of his nose. "Evans ain't no fool. An' he must know somethin' about the past, sence he couldn't 'a' meant me by those threats. It may be that your father got cl'ar—he may be still livin', an' this Evans may know all about him an' whar he is. I'll see him to-morrow an' git at the bottom o' this ef I have to squeeze his heart dry!"

"No, father," and the name never sounded near so dear to his ears as then. "The past is dead—let it rest. You are my father—I want no other!"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE DEAD HEARS EVIDENCE.

IN avoiding one corpse to fall over another, with intense darkness all around, and an injured, if not dying friend, lying close at hand, denying one the privilege of escaping all such horrors by precipitate flight; such was the far from pleasant predicament in which Sweet William now found himself.

As his hand first touched that clammy, cold face, the old trapper believed it to be that of his young friend, and his start back was purely mechanical, but the discovery of the second body in such juxtaposition caused the truth to flash upon his mind with startling vividness.

A black record was lying beneath his hand, if he was only cunning enough to find the key by which it might be read aright.

As he stood erect, wiping his hand with an involuntary shudder, Sweet William noticed that the air was strongly tainted by a sickening odor. His herculean exertions in bearing his wounded friend so far and at such a place had obliged him to satisfy his laboring lungs through his mouth instead of nostrils, which will account for his failing to make this discovery until on his return from the spring with canteen filled with water for Leo Friend.

A feeble groan came from out the darkness a few yards away, and thus guided, Sweet William quickly regained the side of his wounded comrade. Leo was just recovering from the short swoon caused by the loss of blood and the pain of his wound consequent upon the hasty flight of the old trapper through the darkness which prevented him from picking and choosing his course.

"It's a fri'nd, boy," muttered Sweet William, reassuringly, as the young man started away from the touch of his hand. "You was tuck kinder fainty, you know, from your woun'd, an' I done fetched you in yere. I don't reckon thar's much ef any chance o' them black-petti-coated fellers stumblin' on us in a hole like this. Jest take a drink an' lay still fer a bit, ontel we both git back a little o' the wind what's gone—"

"I remember, now," said Leo, and his voice was markedly stronger. "I must have fallen into their clutches, but for you; and that would have been certain death. I thank you—from the bottom of my heart, I thank you!"

"Better wait fer thanks ontel you know whether or no I hev saved ye," bluntly interposed the old trapper. "That bit o' lead must 'a' hit you hard, fer you've bin bleedin' like a stuck hog—"

"I don't care so much for that. You saved me from the rope, and a shameful death, though, before heaven, I am innocent of the crime for which they have condemned me. It is not that I fear death itself, so much. I could die without a murmur, of an honest wound like this—"

"Tain't a honest woun'd—'twas given by the hand of a cowardly traitor!" and Sweet William uttered a grating, vindictive curse against Gerald Evans that, bitter cause as he himself had to hate him, caused a cold shiver to creep over Leo Friend's frame. "He shell pay fer that—fer that an' all the rest. I swear it, by the Eternal!"

"It may have been an accident—"

"Don't you say one word in his favor, or I'll ever be sorry that I didn't let him alone to work his will on to ye—mind that. He's a snake—a p'izen sarpint from the day o' his birth up. But I'll draw his teeth—sooner or later I'll draw his teeth an' smash his p'izen head onder my heel—bah! Don't le's say no more about the dog. It leaves a bad taste in my mouth—"

"And a worse smell in the air!" echoed Leo, for the first time noticing the noxious effluvia with which the atmosphere was filled. "What can it be? There must be carrion close at hand."

"You smell the flowers, I reckon," said Sweet William, hurriedly. "The woods is full o' 'em—"

Leo uttered an exclamation of surprise, but the old trapper cut him short, with a strange petulance.

"I say it's flowers you smell, nur you don't want to contradict me any more, nuther. I ain't in the best o' humors, jest now, an' I'm uglier'n p'izen when I'm crossed. You want to git up an' lean onto me; we'll go over to the spring, yender, an' I'll take a look at your hurt. So—now take it easy, an' lean harder onto me—that-a-way."

Leo Friend was feeling far too faint and weak to offer any resistance to the stronger will of his whimsical companion, and obeyed the blunt command without a word of remonstrance.

Sweet William steered clear of the corpses, giving the spot where they lay as wide a berth as possible, half-leading, half-carrying the wounded man to where the little spring bubbled out from under a huge, moss-grown rock, forming a small pool at its base, then silently gliding away down another narrow ravine, to the west of that in which lay the bodies of the unknown dead men.

Thanks to the favoring breeze, the disagreeable odor was barely perceptible at this point, and with a long breath of relief, Sweet William placed his injured comrade upon a mossy, leaf-strewn bench of earth, close beside the little pool of water. For a few moments he stood in silence, his head bent in an attitude of intense listening. All was silent, save for the faint tinkling of the falling water, the soft rustle of the dense foliage overhead and upon either hand, and the far-away sound of the whip-poor-will's plaint.

"They've give up the chase, or else they're runnin' on a false scent," he muttered, with an air of evident relief. "Lucky fer us it's so, too. That hurt o' yours wants 'tending' to, an' that kind o' work can't easy be did in the dark."

"Don't run the risk of a light on my account," protested Leo. "I'd far rather wait until day dawns. The wound is doing well enough—it hardly hurts me at all, now; it only feels numb—"

"That may be a good sign, or it may be a powerful bad one, jest a'cordin' to how it happens," interrupted the old trapper. "Ef the bullet hes gone clean through, or ef it lays whar we kin git at it to cut it out, I don't reckon we'll hev much trouble."

"If not—if it has gone inside?"

"Ef that's the case, an' you feel like you say, you'll sea'cely live to w'ar gray ha'rs," was the blunt response.

Leo Friend raised no further objections. He had passed through so many and such varying trials during the past week, had been deprived of rest and repose by intense anxiety for himself and another even more dear, that, adding the pain caused by his wound and the severe drain attendant upon the loss of so much blood, he felt wholly unable to guide his own actions, much less those of one like the old trapper. He sunk down upon his leafy couch, and lay in a

dull, aching stupor, only dimly conscious of his surroundings.

Sweet William, guided solely by the sense of touch, gathered together a pile of dry leaves and a few seasoned twigs, heaping them in a small cavity at the foot of a scrubby bush where that and an angle of the huge rock would effectually prevent the light of the fire from spreading to a distance. Striking a match, he ignited the leaves, carefully feeding the tiny flame with dried twigs until it was sufficiently strong for his purpose.

"Now you want to slue around yere, so I kin git at that hole, young feller. So! lay still, now, an' take it as easy as you kin, considerin'."

With his keen knife, Sweet William slit open the blood-saturated garments of the young man, and laid bare the wound. His face was very grave at first, but as the coagulated blood was tenderly washed away, his countenance grew more cheerful.

The treacherous shot had struck several inches below Leo's shoulder-blade, on the left side, the bullet emerging from his breast, a few inches below the left nipple, having apparently passed directly through the body; but only apparently. Striking upon a rib-bone, the bullet had followed it around, inflicting a painful and severe wound, but by no means mortal, or even dangerous, provided proper precautions were taken.

"Tain't no more'n a scratch!" said the old trapper, with a long breath of relief. "You'll be saunder'n ever in a week's time. A hole like that lets out a pizen lot o' weakness—clars the system better'n a hull quart o' pills."

Leo made no reply, and thinking him asleep, worn out with fatigue, Sweet William worked on in silence. Tearing a piece from Leo's shirt, he scraped it into lint and thoroughly "plugged" up both holes, then bandaged the hurt to the best of his ability.

"That's a job well jobbed, an' now I'll take a closer peep at them dead critters over yender—"

"I'll go too," said Friend, lifting his head. "I'm curious to learn what kind of flowers—"

"You'd better stay whar you be," gravely interrupted the old man. "The sight won't do you no good in your fix. One lookin' at 'em is good as two, an' I'm stronger an' better able to bear such a sight then you be."

"I am quite strong enough, thanks to your good surgery. Don't say any more, or I'll go alone."

The old trapper gave a snort of disgust at this speech, but there was a quiet decision in the young man's voice that told him further protest would be in vain.

It was no difficult task to find materials for making a torch that would answer the purpose, and lighting it at the fire, Sweet William led the way to the spot where the dead lay sleeping until the last trump should awaken them.

Truly a gruesome sight!

The two bodies lay in distorted attitudes, as though cast brutally down from the bank above. One face was upturned, the film-covered eyeballs staring blindly up toward heaven as though mutely appealing for vengeance upon its destroyers.

Several days had evidently elapsed since the two unfortunates met their death, and the sight was one so sickening that Leo Friend leaned back against the bank, wholly overcome.

Not so with the old trapper. Right or wrong, he had formed an opinion which he spared no pains to decide. Bending over the upturned face, he scrutinized it closely. A heavy gray beard and mustache; long hair that was nearly white; a prominent nose; broad, high forehead, across the left edge of which was a jagged scar.

Sweet William rose erect, with a peculiar snort, that spake louder than words.

"I knowed how it'd be," he said, in a low, strange voice. "When I fust tetcht that body, it came to me like a flash. It fits in with the rest, an' makes it all so cl'ar. An' look at that! he fit hard afore he went under, too!"

"How can you tell?" asked Leo, in a low, awe-stricken tone, as the old trapper turned toward him.

"You kin see—he was shot an' stabbed, both; but that ain't all. Look at this hand—it's cut pritty nigh in two. He grabbed the knife held by the feller that killed him, so tight that when it was jerked loose, it clean crippled his hand—see?"

"Yes—but let us go. It is so horrible—it makes me sick—I cannot look upon—"

Sweet William sprang forward and caught the young man in his arms, else he would have fallen.

"I told ye so—but you would come!" he muttered, disgustedly, as he bore his almost unconscious burden away from the spot of death. "You got to lay down an' take a nap, the fust thing—"

"Not here!" shuddered Leo, as his conductor paused beside the spring. "I could not sleep so near—that horrible face would haunt me—"

"Ef I didn't know better, I'd most think you rubbed 'em out," the old man muttered, as, yielding to the wish of his young comrade, he slowly aided him down the other ravine.

For nearly an hour longer they moved on in utter silence, then Leo was forced to call a halt, too much exhausted to travel further. Sweet William was willing, and seeking out a snug hollow where an overhanging ledge of rocks would partially protect them from the dew, the fugitives sunk down to rest.

Leo almost immediately fell asleep, but not so his old companion. Lighting his pipe he smoked slowly and thoughtfully, his brain unusually busy. The day was dawning when he bent over and gently awakened Leo.

"I couldn't wait no longer," he said, in answer to the inquiring look. "I've found out who killed Don Larkin!"

CHAPTER XXII.

A GLIMPSE OF THE MYSTERY.

"No, I ain't jokin', nuther be I drunk, nur yit gone crazy," quietly added Sweet William, in answer to the wondering, almost dazed look with which Leo Friend greeted the truly startling announcement of a discovery that would, if properly substantiated, remove the brand of shame from his name, and from a hunted convict change him into a free and respected citizen once more. "I've thunk it all over sence you've bin layin' thar asleep," added the old trapper. "Not only am I ready fer to swar that I kin lay my han' onto the man as killed Don Larkin, but more'n that—I b'lieve I kin p'int out the head ones in the murder o' them two men back yender."

"If you can, I'll never forget—I can't speak out what I would like, old friend. Something chokes me whenever I try. But the time will come—"

"Take it easy, young feller," Sweet William bluntly interrupted. "I'm runnin' this job fer my own satisfaction. Ef you're benefited any way, that's your good luck; but you don't need to waste any breath in thankin' me. I'd do jest the same ef you'd never been born."

Leo made no response. He was more than usually sensitive, now that he was so weak and his nerves so unstrung, and the blunt, almost rude address of the old trapper was keenly felt. If Sweet William noticed this fact, he gave no sign. He deliberately crumbled up a piece of tobacco, and filled his pipe, nor spoke again until the fragrant weed was smoking freely.

"Now that I kin see my way pritty nigh to the end, I don't reckon thar'll be any harm in my tellin' you the hull story from fust to last. You kin pick out them parts that most consarn yourself as I go along."

"You've hearn tell o' the 'Crimson Clan,' as the set o' hoss-thieves an' cut-throats is called that uses around these parts. Course you hev, sence them pizen critters 'cused you o' bein' Cap'n Moonlight. Waal, it's all along o' them varmints that me 'nd my mates come to this part o' the kentry. Not to putt too fine a p'int on it, we're detectives, an' our business is to break up the hull gang, of which these red riders is only a small part. I never let on to you afore, 'cause I wasn't sure you was of the right stripe. I've tried you, now, an' know that I kin trust you fer whatever help may be needed."

"So much fer that, an' now fer the de-tails."

"Fer sartin reasons, me 'nd my pard sold our hosses afore we come to this settlement. We sold 'em to the fust hoss traders we met; those two same men we saw the dead bodies of, back yender. I know it. We spent one night 'long of them, an' that big scar couldn't be easy mistaken. The old man was the boss, an' he paid us. He only hed big bills, which we preferred to gold, bein' easier to kerry. In makin' the right change, I give him a marked bill fer five dollars, an' a ten-dollar gold piece thet somebody hed marked with a star on one side."

"Waal, we come here, an' set to playin' our parts, mine bein' that of a rip-roarin', rum-suckin' old coon. But we wasn't idle, by no manner o' means. We was at work, spottin' members o' the gang, one a'ter another, an' doin' our level best to diskiver who an' which was the boss—Captain Moonlight."

"We hed our sp'icions, o' course, an' worked on them, but it wouldn't do to show our hand afore we was dead sure. One thing I don't mind tellin' you: these hoss-thieves as make up the Crimson Clan is workin' in cahoots with the Mormons, ef they ain't the same comp'ny as call theirselves the 'Sons of Dan,' or Danites."

"My findin' this out set me to watchin' Joe Smith an' his two chums, Rigdon and Gerald Evans, an' thanks to that, together with what we diskivered back thar in the holler, I've found out who killed Don Larkin."

"The night afore—now mind this p'int—the night afore Joe Smith showed us his merri- cle, I was follerin' an' watchin' them three men, workin' like pizen snakes in the dark. By a lucky chance they passed nigh whar I was cached in the timmer, an' like a good scout, I follered to see what I could see. You know the night was a bright moonlight, an' so I didn't dar' git cluss enough to 'em to ketch any o' thar talk as they went along. But afore long they come to a halt, an' lightin' a lantern, set to diggin' a hole in the ground under a big tree. That give me a chance to crowd up clusser, which I did, slick enough."

"They was laughin' an' in a high good humor over somethin', an' 'twasn't long afore they let out enough to show me the game they was playin'. They was plantin' a treasure, which they was goin' to get Anderson Gladden to help 'em dig up ag'in. They 'lowed that would fetch him over to thar side, body an' britches. With his good will, an' that o' the frinds he would kerry with him, they calc'lated they would be strong enough to hold thar own ag'in the storm that hes bin a-brewin' fer so long."

"Now I ain't a Mormon lover, myself, an fer public good, as well as fer private reasons, I made up my mind to pile thar little game. So, when they'd left, I marks the spot, an' then struck off to find my mate. I did find him, an' atween us, we fixed up a little s'prise fer the Mormons."

"Fust, we tuck an' dug up the treasure, an' a nice little sum it was, too; gold kine an' bank notes, over two thousan' dollars in all. We was countin' it up, when what should we find but that five-dollar note an' the eagle with a star—the same money I paid to the trader as bought our hosses the week afore!"

"Nat'ally, we was kinder astonished. Ef thar hed bin only one piece, it wouldn't 'n' looked so queer; but to see them both together, an' knowin' as we did that the traders hedn't bin seen in these parts, leastways by any o' our men, while those as buried the money hedn't bin out o' the neighborhood sence we come here, it ain't no ways strange that we should suspect foul play."

"Waal, we tuck the money an' putt it away in a safe place until we could decide what else to do with it, an' then fixed up the surprise. A little s'archin' 'round soon diskivered a fine old rattlesnake, which we putt in the box an' kivered all up, so that nobody wouldn't s'pect nothin' until they dug up the box an' raised the kiver—"

"But they would be bitten!" exclaimed Leo, his first interruption since silenced by Sweet William. "Surely you did not intend that—"

"Small loss ef we hed," grunted the old man; "but that wasn't our game. When we found the snake, I flipped a silk handkercher at it, an' the fool critter struck, in course. That tangled its fangs, an' I jest jerked 'em out—a easy job o' dentistry, ef a feller only knows how."

"Waal, the next thing was to find out when the tea-party was to come off, so we could be thar to see the fun. That part fell to my mate, an' he did his work well, too."

"They's one thing I hain't told you about him; an' that is his powers—I mean he kin throw his voice all around, an' even make dead things speak fer all the world as if they was alive—"

"Ventriloquism," suggested Leo.

"I reckon; I call it his powers. 'Twas through them he helped make a fool of Joe Smith the night o' the merri- cle, when Hark Foster finished the job by tumblin' out o' the tree, a'ter lettin' down the white pigeon. He hed a little fun 'long o' the Mormons an' Gladden, too, afore they sot out to hunt fer the treasure, an' while they was lookin' fer the voice, he hed time to give me the office, an' both ov us cached ourselves in the bushes nigh whar we found the money."

"They come in good time, Joe Smith suckin' at a whisky-jug, an' fast gittin' drunk as a b'iled owl, an' Gladden totin' the tools fer to dig up the treasure."

"The other three played him fer a fust-class fool, an' they did thar work well. They drew a magic circle, an' said prayers and charms by the dozen, to keep off the speoks, a-crackin' sly jokes atween themselves whenever Gladden wasn't payin' attention. It was high old fun fer them! But it wasn't long afore the joke was on t'other side, when we jined in the chorus."

"They killed the black ram—good eatin' he was, too, though not quite as tender as lamb!—an' Gladden sot to work, jest makin' the dirt fly."

"Then mate set his powers to work, until you'd 'a' thought a hull dog-goned menagerie hed bin turned loose in thet bit o' timmer. 'Twas wuth a fortin' jest to see them three pizen Mormons! The joke sot mighty oneasy onto thar stomicks, that was plain to be see'd. They was mighty bad skeered, an' a-growin' no better monstrous fast. Mate didn't give 'em no rest, but worked his powers fer all that was out. We could hear thar teeth rattle—all but Gladden. He was true grit. He jest worked on an' paid no 'tention to nothin'."

"Finally mate sounded a rattler, so nat'ral that it skeered even me. You'd order sec'd them three pizen critters git up an' git! Run! an' yell! Now you're talkin'! Why a double-an'-twisted harrycane couldn't 'a' cut a straighter swath through them bushes an' briers then they did!"

"Gladden never fazed a ha'r, but clubbed his pick an' stood ready fer whatever mought come. Then mate, thinkin' to save him the skeer of the snake in the box, made his powers speak, an' warned him to run fer it while he could. But 'twas no go. The old man hed come fer money, an' wouldn't be bluffed off."

"He dug down until he struck the box, then jumped into the hole an' tore it open with his

han's. Of course the rattler struck at him, an' hit him full in the face.

"Somehow I forgot the critter couldn't bite, an' was goin' to help him, but mate tried to drown the noise I made in the bushes by givin' a hollow laugh. I don't know whether the old feller smelt a mice, or ef he was driv' plum crazy by the snake bite an' all what had bin goin' on, but anyhow, he give a howl an' lepped at us, head on, like a mad bull.

"I knowed thar'd be matter fer a funeral ef ever he clapped two eyes onto us, an' as the shortest way out of a nasty fix, I up an' lent him a good one, right atween the eyes, with my fist. He keeled over like he was kilt, but when we looked, we see he was only stunned, an' would be all right in a minnit or two. So I shouldered the dead ram, an' mate tuck the jug o' licker, an' we puckacheed, hot foot."

"Then you think that they murdered—"

"Whar else did the money come from—an' the two men as rightly owned it a-layin' over yender dead? Bither they did it, or else thar tellers did it, which 'mounts to about the same thing."

"Then you think that they murdered Larkin as well?"

"No; I think that was done by a honest man. Look yere. Sence the trial I've found out that John Hopper an' Jake Ramsel, the two men who swore they found the dyin' man, an' tried to swear away your life, belong to the Crimson Clan. They was alays close chums of Don Larkin, an' all on 'em hard nuts. Them drovers was murdered fer thar money, but one on 'em fit hard fer his life, an' in that fight Don Larkin got killed, full four and twenty hours afore they said you murdered him."

"But you have no proof—no absolute proof," muttered Leo, despondently. "You may believe this, but others?"

"The proof'll be comin', don't you fear," was the confident reply. "Afore another week is over the hull thing'll be made cl'ar, an' then, Gerald Evans—"

"You hate him, and yet he aided us to escape from the Vigilantes last night. How is that?"

"He didn't dar' refuse. I told you what signs to make ef any of them got hold of you, but I didn't tell you what them signs meant. I will, now. The first sign said that you were a member of the Crimson Clan. The second one said you belonged to the Danites. You was in trouble, an' when you made either one o' them signs any member o' the gangs as saw it was bound by a sacred oath to help you, even at the cost o' his own life."

"Then he—Gerald Evans, is a Danite, and one of the Crimson Clan?"

"More than that. Gerald Evans is none other than the notorious Captain Moonlight himself!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

A QUESTION OF IDENTITY.

FOR the second time that night Simple Simon found himself accused of being a spy, and the words emphasized by the muzzle of a loaded pistol staring him full in the face. Nor was the comfort of his situation at all improved by the actions of Hark Foster. That worthy individual placed more reliance upon the word of his idolized daughter than he did upon his own judgment, and at Mattie's accusation he drew a long and ugly-looking knife, creeping noiselessly to within arm's length of Simple Simon, his little eyes glowing venomously, his wiry form crouched, his every muscle strained in readiness for the fatal leap.

Just as he did earlier in the night, when a similar peril threatened him, Simple Simon raised one hand and made the peculiar sign that proclaimed him one of the great family of which the Crimson Clan formed a small part. As before, this mute declaration had its effect upon Hark Foster, and recalled his wonted prudence. Not so with the young woman. A mocking laugh parted her lips.

"Secret signs 'can be stolen as well as passwords, and this is but one more count in the indictment."

Father, lead the way into my room, and you, sir, follow him. Walk uprightly, unless you would be reminded by a bullet in your back; fitting end for a traitorous spy!"

Without a word Simple Simon turned upon his heel and followed Hark Foster into the red-draped room where Mattie had parted with Leo Friend. She brought up the rear and closed the door behind her. When Simon turned round all traces of the entrance had disappeared.

Apparently Mattie was satisfied that escape for him was impossible, for she lowered the hammer of her pistol and replaced it in her belt. Sinking into a chair she eyed the rag-clad stranger with evident interest and curiosity. Her gaze was coolly reciprocated. Admiration was plainly expressed by the man's eyes; but it was rather the cold, critical admiration a connoisseur displays in viewing some perfect animal than that excited by the presence of a lovely woman.

Mattie Foster was quick to note this fact, and her big eyes flamed with hot anger. She was doubly resolved that Simple Simon should not

easily escape from the trap she had laid for him. Yet her voice was low and calm as she addressed her intended victim.

"Please be seated, sir; I have some questions to ask you."

She was obeyed in silence. At a sign, Hark Foster took his position close behind the chair in which Simple Simon seated himself.

"Now, sir," she added; "who and what are you?"

"A man, and a member in good standing of the great confederacy of which the Crimson Clan forms a portion," was the prompt response.

"You have the signs and passwords and the different grips, I suppose?"

Simple Simon bowed assent. The young woman added:

"Father, test him. See if he has spoken the truth thus far, before we go any further."

"He's got 'em all right," said Hark, after a few moments spent with his hand clasping that of the accused.

"Very good. Now, sir, I suppose you are aware of the doom pronounced against traitors, by the League? And that a man is deemed a spy and a traitor, when he obtains possession of any secrets of the League, without first being duly initiated?"

"I know all—more, perhaps than you can tell me, unless you have been admitted to the Inner Circle, as I have," replied Simple Simon, quietly. "Are you aware that whoever accuses a fellow member, without fully substantiating their charges, is deemed guilty of a serious offense, and punished accordingly?"

"You are here to answer questions, not to ask them," cried Mattie, flushing hotly, for the moment losing her cool, almost contemptuous composure. "Whatever charges I may bring against you, will be properly sustained, at the right time and place. Tell me—how long since you joined the League and was confirmed a member?"

"Something over six months ago. If you doubt my word, it can easily be seen which is right. Of course you belong to the family, since you assume the right to cross-examine me. If you are a member of influence, you should possess a Record. Examine that, and you will find my name and description duly recorded."

"What is your name and number, then?"

"Thomas Hunter, number 127."

At a sign from his daughter, Hark Foster handed her a small, leather bound book from a strong desk upon the table. This she opened, and after a brief search, appeared to be comparing Simple Simon with something which she found therein. Whatever her emotions none were allowed to reveal themselves upon her countenance.

"The description corresponds, but there is no mention of your being admitted to the Inner Circle."

"I was promoted less than one month ago. You will doubtless receive the notice in due time."

"Let that pass. Admitted that you are a legal member, in good standing, and that you have a perfect right to make use of the signs, passwords and secret grips. That much in your favor. Of course you can tell me the punishment due one who raises his hand against another member of the family, to do him malicious injury?"

"If the injury be not fatal, the criminal is flogged and placed upon probation for a length of time to be decided by the jury. If fatal, he must die."

"And if, in addition, his interference should work ill to the entire family, by hindering—let us say, for example—a runner who was conveying an important message, upon the prompt deliverance of which perhaps depended a score or more of lives?"

"Death by bullet, steel or cord, whichever could be employed with the greatest degree of ease and safety," was the prompt reply, while the lip of the accused curled with a slight smile of amused contempt.

"You are sure you have made no mistake?"

"Quite. He who sies in that manner, without good and sufficient cause, is condemned to death by his own act. The same law adds that his executioner must be the first member of the family whom he may meet after his crime is discovered."

"You have uttered your own doom!" cried Mattie, her face aglow with a fierce joy.

"Come forth, Justus McKee!"

An ample fold of the crimson curtains was flung aside, and a rough-looking, travel-stained figure emerged. A wiry built man of middle age. A hard, rugged countenance, with crime and lawless passions written upon every line. His sunken, bloodshot eyes were fixed upon the face of Simple Simon with a glare of devilish hatred, mixed with triumph.

"This is your witness, Miss Foster? I expected as much, when I saw the drift of your questions," said Simple Simon, the irritating smile deepening upon his lip. "Let him make his statement. Of course you are too just to condemn me unheard?"

"You shall have justice done you, be sure of that," she replied, with a sharp, hard laugh.

"You shall meet the same fate that your own lips declared was deserved by a traitor."

"Provided I cannot clear myself of sin, you mean."

"Go on!" snapped Mattie, addressing the witness. "Why do you stand there like a senseless block? Speak out!"

Not a little confused by this sudden and unlooked for outburst, and still further agitated by his long pent-up passions and hatred, McKee made his statement in a rambling, discursive style not easy of comprehension.

Condensed, his statement amounted to this: He was a member of the League, and from his well-known fidelity and cunning, had often been selected as a confidential messenger, whenever word of importance was sent to distant parties. Upon this occasion the chief had given him a sealed order to convey with all speed to Captain Moonlight, of the Crimson Clan. On the second day out from head-quarters, he was overtaken by Simple Simon, or Thomas Hunter, as he knew him. Hunter stated that the chief had sent him to aid the messenger, in case of trouble, and knowing that he was regarded as a true man among the family, he, McKee, had not the faintest suspicion that all was not right. That same night he was awakened from sleep, only to find himself a prisoner in the hands of over a dozen men, who appeared to be upon the best of terms with Hunter. He was conveyed to a deep and gloomy ravine, where he had been kept bound hand and foot until that very night.

During his captivity he heard enough to feel sure that Hunter and his friends were enemies of and plotting against the Crimson Clan. Satisfied of this, he redoubled his efforts to escape, and finally succeeded, making the best of his way to the cabin of Hark Foster, where he hoped to meet Captain Moonlight.

Failing in this, he told the whole story to me," said Mattie Foster. "You can imagine what joy the sound of your sweet voice gave me, and now know why I was so ready to admit you. You are a convicted traitor, and the doom that you pronounced with your own lips, shall be executed this very hour—"

"Before you proceed to carry out your sentence, perhaps you will be kind enough to read this," said Simple Simon, producing a sealed envelope and passing it across the table. "Possibly the contents of that will induce you to grant me a respite."

Mattie tore open the envelope and hastily glanced over the inclosure. It was signed by the chief of the League, and stated that the bearer was bound upon business of the utmost importance, ending by commanding all good and true members to lend the bearer, Thomas Hunter, whatever aid or assistance he might require in carrying out his orders.

"That was 'mong the papers he stole from me!" cried McKee, noting the startling change in Mattie's looks.

"What name is mentioned in that paper, Miss Foster?" sharply demanded Simple Simon, arising from his seat.

"Yours—but it may be a forgery," she faltered.

"Then, Justus McKee, you are my prisoner!"

As he spoke, Simple Simon sprung forward and grasped the fellow by the throat, whirling him around so that he, himself, stood facing father and daughter. Mattie arose, pistol in hand, white with anger.

"You shall not arrest him in my house! I am mistress here—"

"Not in the face of that order. You are a woman, and I don't want to be rude, but I have my orders, and I mean to carry them out, at all hazards."

The infuriated beauty raised her weapon, but Hark Foster grasped her arm and the bullet was wasted upon the ceiling. Shielding her with his own body, he said:

"Putt up your weepion, boss, or you'll git hurt. The gal's crazy an' don't know what she's doin'. Let the matter stan' as it is ontel the boys come over in the mornin'; then what they say is right, shell be did."

"I am willing, on one condition. This man must be bound, and I will hold you responsible for his safe keeping. If he is on hand in the morning, I promise not to report you two at head-quarters."

After some few words more, this was agreed upon. The man was bound and placed upon a cot in the corner. Then Simple Simon retired to the couch provided for him in the outer room, and quiet succeeded the stormy scene.

Time passed on, and all seemed at rest. But Mattie Foster was not one to rest tamely under defeat, and her bold spirit soon devised a method of gaining her end, without betraying her hand too openly.

When satisfied that Simple Simon was soundly sleeping upon his post, feeling assured that no one could leave the crimson room without arousing him, she freed McKee from his bonds, and enjoining caution upon him, she revealed a secret door at the further end of the room, through which she led him, nor left him until he was clear of the grounds and safe at the edge of the timber.

Returning quickly she found her father still soundly sleeping upon his post. Noiselessly

opening the door, she saw Simple Simon placidly slumbering, evidently unsuspecting the act of treachery just accomplished.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE CRIMSON CLAN AT WORK.

WHEN Hark Foster was aroused from slumber by the sound of Nancy, the servant girl, bustling around in the summer-kitchen, preparing breakfast, his first glance was cast in the direction of the low cot upon which Justus McKee was reclining when slumber sealed his eyelids, some hours previously. His eyes opened wider than ever, and his lower jaw dropped, ludicrous dismay deeply imprinted upon his every feature.

"Hist!" and Mattie glided noiselessly to his side, and clapped one little hand over his gaping mouth. "He is gone, but you know nothing about the matter. Leave it all to me. Go out now and wake up that rascal."

Foster obeyed, but not until he assured himself that his pistol was close to his hand and ready for quick work in case of need. If Simple Simon held him responsible, as he had said—at least he would have the first blow.

His fears appeared quite groundless, for Simple Simon arose on being called, stretched, yawned, then left the house and sauntered down to the spring where he took a good wash. Shortly after he was summoned to breakfast. He politely saluted Mattie, but her only response was a short, angry glance, not unmixed with triumph. Hark Foster fidgeted as though sitting upon needles, and he kept one hand hidden beneath the table, nervously fingering the butt of a pistol.

Simple Simon ate heartily, to all seeming wholly unconscious of the uneasiness felt by his two companions, but when his hunger was appeased he addressed Mattie, with a bland smile that was strangely irritating to her disordered nerves.

"Miss Foster, I sincerely hope that you experience no ill effects from your promenade last night, or rather this morning? The dew was so heavy."

"I do not understand you, sir," was the cold response.

"I am sorry; perhaps I was only dreaming. Yet I could almost swear that you left the house about two hours before daybreak, in company with another—a man, I am quite sure."

Hark Foster turned a sickly white and noiselessly drew his pistol, hidden by the table. The muzzle was pointed toward Simple Simon. A thumb was upon the hammer, a finger upon the trigger. At any moment the old man could send a bullet into the stomach of the man sitting opposite. Simple Simon's life hung upon a single thread.

Mattie Foster flushed hotly, instead. She knew that her treachery had been discovered, but her courage did not fail her. There was exultation in her voice as she replied:

"You are quite right, sir. I did leave the house early this morning, and a man did accompany me. I supposed you were asleep, for I looked in upon you just before I left and immediately after I returned. I wonder you did not follow us; indeed, I wish you had!"

"May I ask your reason?" smiled Simple Simon.

"Pure economy; the breakfast you have eaten would have been saved at the expense of a bit of lead and powder," was the prompt, seemingly careless response.

"You are very frank, Miss Foster. I will follow your example. Doubtless I should have followed you this morning only it happens that I was abroad just a trifle earlier than you and your friend. Possibly you may have heard the whip-poor-will singing close to the house last night. I did, and as the bird is an especial favorite with me I ventured outside to listen to it more easily. That same whip-poor-will was on guard when you left the house; it was close to you when you parted with your friend at the edge of the timber, and before you regained the house, Justus McKee was a prisoner in the hands of my most trustworthy follower."

Mattie stared at Simple Simon, her bosom swelling with an anger she could not express. She could not doubt his words, for a satisfied triumph filled his eyes. Afraid to trust her tongue, she arose and flounced out of the room.

"Now, old man," Simple Simon said with an authoritative nod, "you can put up your pistol. Your life and that of your lovely and amiable daughter depends upon my safety. The sooner you understand that I am master of the situation, that in working against me you are doubly injuring yourself, the better for all concerned. As it happens, there was no harm done by your daughter's mad freak of last night, but the simple fact of her setting free a prisoner of the League would, if reported at headquarters, be enough to doom you both. If you control her, and act upon the square yourself, for the future I shall say nothing about the matter. You will do well to bear this in mind. I never warn the same man twice."

Without waiting for a reply Simple Simon arose from the table and left the house. Seeking the shade of a tree from whence he commanded an unobstructed view of the house as

well as of the entire clearing, he lay down, lighting his pipe, and smoking lazily, as though at peace with the entire world.

Mattie Foster did not leave the house before dinner, and Hark hovered around the recumbent mass of fantastic rags, though not daring to come too near. Simple Simon had made a powerful impression upon the old fox.

Shortly after the dinner hour, the men who had met at the old hut in the hollow on the past night, began to drop in, and the matter of business alluded to on that occasion was entered upon more fully. The whole matter was laid before Simple Simon, and he appeared to be deeply interested in the details.

"I'll make one of the party, if nobody objects," he declared. "It has been all of three months since I tried my hand at horse-lifting. Of course the captain will lead us," he asked, suddenly.

"He said so, when the word was first given out," replied Hark Foster. "It's likely he'll be on time, though I hain't seen him sense yesterday."

"Mebbe he'll putt it off, now the vigilantys is up ag'in?" suggested Jake Ramsel.

"We only got to wait an' see," grunted Hark Foster.

As they could do nothing more until the captain made his appearance or sent them word, the men scattered to amuse themselves as best they could. Refusing an invitation to take a hand at cards, Simple Simon returned to his grassy couch beneath the tree.

The afternoon was half spent when a slight built figure emerged from the line of timber and briskly approached the house. From beneath his ragged head-dress, Simple Simon recognized the new-comer, Gerald Evans, and a strange light filled his blue eyes. That alone betrayed the intense interest and curiosity that filled his breast. He did not move a limb until after Gerald had entered the building. Then he did raise his head, only to find that Hark Foster was squatting near, eying him keenly from beneath his shaggy eyebrows.

"It's cooler here than in the house," he said slowly, though reading the half-formed resolve that was shaping itself in the other's brain; and these words showed Simple Simon that he was an object of suspicion.

"I don't want to go inside," nor did he, for at that moment Mattie and Gerald emerged from the door and slowly sauntered toward the spring.

For full an hour they stood there in deep converse, nor did Hark Foster abandon his position near the apparently sleeping Fool Simon, until, just as he was departing, Evans called him aside for a few words.

An hour later, Hark summoned the men, and informed them that the proposed plan was to be carried out, with the one exception that he was to lead them, the captain having important business in another direction.

Their preparations were simple enough. They were to go on foot, each with a couple of halters and a bridle concealed upon their persons. It is an extravagant horse-thief that travels upon his own animal.

The party divided into couples. Hark Foster and Simple Simon keeping together, and as the sun set, they started, having some ten miles to traverse before reaching the field of their intended robbery.

It was nearly midnight when they reached the rendezvous, not far from the farm-house, and when all were assembled, Hark Foster addressed them:

"This is the work we've got to do, an' the best way to go about it. In the pasture lot down yender, thar's eight critters fit fer our purpose. T'other side the house is another lot; we kin pick out five or six good critters thar. We'll divide up, an' clean out both lots at the same time. When the critters is safe roped, we'll strike out, two an' two, j'inin' ag'in at Little Turkey crick, whar we'll find boys waitin' to kerry the animales funder. You all understand?"

"Seems to me you've forgotten the most important point of the whole business," interposed Simple Simon. "Denbree owns a Morgan stallion, worth his whole herd besides. You don't mean to leave it behind?"

"How kin we help ourselves? He keeps the boss shet up in a tight stable, cluss to the house—"

"I know. I was by here the other day, and inspected the ground closely, intending to do a bit of business on my own hook. But I can pick that lock in five minutes, and in ten more I can have that stallion out in the road without making noise enough to waken a weasel."

"You kin talk—" began Foster, grumblingly.

"And I can act. You are not satisfied that I am what I claim to be. There—I am not blaming you. It is a good plan to suspect every man until he fairly proves the stuff he is made of. I'll do that this very night. If you afraid, I'll go alone—"

"I'll stick to you cluss enough, never fear that," interrupted Foster, with a dry significance that did not escape Simon.

"Very good. The rest of you do your part, and quickly. We will be here before you, with the stallion."

In ten minutes more the two men were standing close to the stable door, which alone separated them from the coveted animal. All was still. The inmates of the farm-house were buried in slumber. Everything seemed favorable for the complete success of the midnight marauders.

Simple Simon was as good as his word, and in less than five minutes had picked the lock of the stable door. But at that moment, coming from inside the stable, the loud fierce barking of a dog was heard. Closely following it came the low grunt, as of a sleepy mortal awakening.

"Look out for the dog—I'll knife the man!" grated Simple Simon, about to fling open the door; but a loud, angry cry came from the farm-house!

"Run fer it!" snarled Hark, with an angry curse.

A shrill whistle came from the field beyond—then loud cries, accompanied by pistol-shots. Slamming of doors were heard within the house, and it was only too plain that the inmates were fully aroused.

Without a word, the two men turned and fled at top speed from the dangerous spot.

CHAPTER XXV.

A BARGAIN.

THOUGH so calm outwardly, Gerald Evans was in a white heat when he made the signal that gave him admittance to the house of Hark Foster. It was Nancy who opened the door, and Evans brushed by her without a word and entered the crimson room without so much as knocking.

Mattie was lying upon one of the couches, her hair disheveled, her face buried in her hands, her eyes red and swollen, bearing indubitable traces of tears. She started up with an angry exclamation, but there was something in the face of Gerald Evans that quieted her passion as by magic. Bold and fearless though she habitually was, an icy hand seemed grasping her heart with a suffocating pressure as she met his gaze, as full of demoniac hatred and rage.

"You have been false to your oath, Mattie Foster—false to me, and false to the League," he said, in a cold, icy voice that contrasted strongly with the lurid fire in his steel-blue eyes.

The young woman laughed shortly, but it sounded strange and unnatural, as she replied:

"You are not very polite, to say the least; but perhaps you will be kind enough to specify my sins?"

"Among other things, you have betrayed the secrets of the League to an outsider. You have given him the signs and passwords by which he can, and most probably will, utterly destroy the family."

"A lie for your lie, Gerald Evans! I have never admitted but two persons to the League, and their names are upon the record."

"You are willing to swear this?"

"A thousand times over—but not at your bidding."

"Good enough!" and Gerald uttered a low laugh of triumph. "You have told me all I care to know. His name was not upon the record two weeks ago, and since then he has not been out of the neighborhood. You are the only one who could have initiated him here, besides myself—"

"Of whom are you speaking?" demanded Mattie, the angry flush chased from her cheek by a sickly pallor.

"Of Leo Friend, your particular friend, and mine. Let me tell you how he has put his foot in it," and with a covert but devilish delight he detailed the events of the past night, so far as he knew them.

"I did not know but he had been playing double on me from the first, thanks to you. Now, since you have set that doubt at rest, I have him foul."

"Gerald Evans, if you dare to harm a single hair of his head, I will kill you, though it cost me my life. You know me—I never warn twice!"

"I know that you will be as good as your word if I ever give you the chance, but I cut my eye-teeth long before you were born, my pretty. Still, I prefer you as an ally, if we can come to terms."

"What dirty work have you on hand now?"

"Something in which I need your aid, Mattie, which I am quite sure you will not refuse me. Should you be so foolish, something truly lamentable would occur—"

"Speak plainly, Gerald Evans, and spare your sneers, else they may be answered in a manner more conclusive than agreeable."

"Anything to keep peace in the family. If you refuse to aid me in my plans, it will be the worse for Leo Friend. I will send off a dozen messengers this very day, to spread the news that he is in possession of the secrets of the League without belonging to the family. You, who well know the solemn oaths that bind us, one and all, can easily picture the result. There will be a man found dead, and that man will be Leo Friend. You will have the comfort of knowing that you signed his death-warrant."

"You would not live to hear the verdict, at

least. Take that as an offset to your threat. So far we understand each other, I believe. Now tell me what work you have on hand that is too difficult or dangerous for a cunning scoundrel like you to carry out without a woman's assistance."

"Not here," and Evans laughed softly. "I am cunning enough to hold my vantage ground. Come outside, where one can be sure there are no listening ears at hand to overhear and store up damaging revelations for future use."

With a contemptuous curl of her full, red lips as her only answer to this insolent speech, Mattie led the way out of the house and to the edge of the spring, where eavesdropping would be impossible.

"Since we are to be allies for the time being," said Evans, after assuring himself that no person could approach within earshot unobserved, "I will be candid, and conceal nothing from you, though the confession might well be mortifying to a less vain man than myself. In short, last evening my suit was positively rejected by Belle Gladden, and, in addition, her father pitched me out of doors, neck and heels:

"Yet I'll wager he is alive and well at this moment."

"And you would win," coolly. "If it were otherwise—if I had followed my first impulse, and sent a bullet through his brain, you and I and every friend of the new religion would now be fleeing for our lives."

"Well, what is it you wish me to do? Am I to plead your suit for you, and try to soften the obdurate damsel's heart, by reciting your manifold virtues? There are few persons who could do the subject justice better than I."

"Not exactly that, but I depend upon you to secure me a private interview with the lady—"

"That is, you expect me to abduct her?"

"Something much the same. I want you to afford her an asylum in that red room of yours, for a time. Once there, I think I can persuade her to change her mind and grant my earnest prayer."

"You must love her very dearly, to be willing to take so much trouble and run such great risk."

"I do like her, but love—my day for that, as you doubtless understand the word, is gone by, long ago. I mean to marry her for her money; nothing more."

"Old Gladden is very well off, but there are richer men who have daughters, who might be easier to manage. You are not dealing openly with me."

"I don't depend wholly upon Anderson Gladden's money, though even that is not to be despised. I am not even sure that he is her father—if so, then he has changed remarkably in the last eighteen years. Belle was born in England, and when she was less than a year old, her father committed a murder, for which he would have been executed, only he managed to escape just before the time set for his trial. Belle's mother brought her back to her people in America, and died soon after."

"Her father was highly connected in England. One of his relatives, a rich old Indian, refused to believe in his guilt, and erected a grand monument over the body which was supposed to be that of Belle's father, found in the Thames, shortly after his escape. On his death, this uncle left his immense fortune to Belle, provided she appeared to claim it before her twenty-first birthday."

"Just how I became acquainted with this fact, does not matter now. Enough that it is an undoubted fact, and that I, as the husband of the heiress, intend claiming the legacy."

"And what is to be my share, for doing your work?"

"You shall name your own price, if my plans are successful," was the prompt reply. "And yet, it seems to me that you will be working quite as much for yourself as for me. I know what your feelings are toward Leo Friend. While Belle Gladden is free, he will never return to you. Let her once marry me, and the chances are all in your favor. You need not look so offended. We are both in the same pickle—both rejected in favor of another."

"I know I am a fool—but I would give my soul, a thousand times over, if that could be, to win him back. You do not know—you cannot imagine what my feelings are. I suffer the tortures of the damned every hour in the day! If it does not end, in one way or another, very soon, I will kill myself to keep from going mad!"

The words as written, convey but a poor idea of the suffocating passion with which this speech was uttered. Even Evans, as well as he fancied he knew Leo, was amazed.

The next minute Mattie was outwardly as calm and composed as ever; only her lips still quivered and her eyes glowed luridly.

"You will send me word what I am to do, and when you need my aid. I promise you all the assistance in my power to give. In return, you will hold Leo harmless—you will even guard him against all other enemies. Remember, I too, will watch, and if I find you are playing me false, true as there is a heaven above! I will kill you with my own hand."

With these words, she turned and hastened back to the house. Evan watched her until she disappeared, then beckoned to Hark Foster. Followed by the old fox, he led the way slowly toward the timber.

"What is the idiot fellow doing here?" "Them as picks him up fer a fool, 'll drop him with burnt fingers, sure!" grinned the old man.

"Has he been playing a part?" sharply demanded Evans. "Who and what is he? How did you get acquainted with him, and how came it he seems so intimate with the men, over yonder?"

"He's one o' the fambly, an' came up from below," was the slow reply, for Hark just remembered the caution given him by Simple Simon.

"You are sure he is what he pretends? I remember, now, that he came here with that fellow they call Sweet William, and he, I am almost sure, is a spy of some sort. You must watch him close. Don't let him into our secrets any more than you can help. I don't like his looks."

"He is goin' on the tramp 'long o' us, tonight. You kin see fer yourself how he does his work."

"Unfortunately I cannot go. You must get along without me for this once. But mind. Don't let him out of your sight for a moment, if you can help it. Try and manage so that at least one trustworthy man keeps an eye upon him all the time, until he is proven to be faithful. There is trouble ahead, and it is growing darker every day. We rushed the business here entirely too fast, and now we must pay the penalty."

"It's them cussed Danites, more 'n us—"

"Sh! not a word against them, if you value your life! Your infernal blunder the other night has raised suspicion against you, and a little more would bring you under the ban. Keep your own counsel, and watch that fellow close. I doubt him—very seriously."

CHAPTER XXVI.

PLOT AND COUNTERPLOT.

SWEET WILLIAM had given Leo Friend ample food for thought, and, had he been less completely worn out, he could have passed hours in silent pondering over the strange and startling revelations. As it was, the deep, sonorous voice of the old trapper grew fainter by degrees, until it faded into the drowsy hum of a far-away bumblebee seeking its distant home—then died away entirely, and the young man slept.

It was high noon when he awoke, and the same indistinct, buzzing sound was ringing in his ears. But the sun was shining brightly now, while then it had been night. Then there was only one Sweet William; now, the old trapper was mysteriously duplicated, pipe, smoke-wreath and all.

"I've bin lookin' fer you sense long afore day," one of the smoke-encircled figures was saying. "Reckon I'd 'a' passed ye clean by, it's sech a snug cache, ef it hedn't bin I ketched a whiff o' 'bacca smoke, an' 'cluded to 'vestigate matters a little."

"Tain't everybody's got a nose like you, mate," said the deep, booming voice of the original Sweet William. "We ain't in Injun country now, an' a man needn't deny his pipe, long's he's reasonable keerful. But what's the word? You ain't been huntin' me fer no reason?"

"The boss sent me—'portant business," began the man who trailed by his nose, but stopped short as a shock-headed, white-faced apparition abruptly made its appearance above a neighboring shrub.

"Talk lower, unless you want me to overhear you," cried Leo, owner of that demoralized looking frontispiece.

"Come out yere, boy," cried Sweet William, cheerily. "Sense you've 'listed in the good cause, tain't no more'n right you should take a sheer in all that's goin' on. So! you don't look quite as piert as mought be; but I reckon you'll do. Boy, know Ham Belcher—mate, this yere's my fri'nd, Leo Friend. You kin talk afore him an' never stop to count your words. I'm his security."

"Hope I see ye, boss," and Belcher bobbed his head toward the young man. "Saw ye down thar, t'other day, when things looked powerful squally—"

"You don't need to bring that up now, Ham," interrupted Sweet William, rather sharply. "You said you come on business. Talk that, fust."

"Tain't so mighty rushin'. They's time enough an' to spar." 'Twas last night, jest a'ter dark, that that McKee feller played sharp on Tim Croghan. Slipped his hobbles, lent Tim a belt 'alongside the nut that'll keep him in fust-class headaches fer a month to come, then made a break fer timmer an' skun out fer keeps."

"You didn't let him git clean off!" and the old trapper's eyes glowed with an angry light that foreboded an outburst of passion that would sweep all before it.

"I didn't, but the rest did," coolly added

Belcher, evidently enjoying the situation. "I was on my way back from town, when I met one o' the boys, who told me what was up. He said they all did thar best, but the slippery coon giv' 'em all the shake. Nobody 'peared to know whar you was, an' I was the only one that knowed whar to find Fool Simon. 'Course I set out at once—"

"You found him? If you wasn't so pesky fond o' hearin' the clack o' your own tongue!"

"A man's tongue's made fer talkin', or 'twouldn't be hung so loose. I'd git through a heap sooner ef you didn't cross my trail so often. Whar was I, anyhow?"

With a snort of disgusted resignation, Sweet William sunk back upon one elbow, yielding to the inevitable. Belcher smiled and nodded approvingly, then resumed.

"I struck a bee-line for the shanty whar Hark Foster an' that she gal o' his'n hangs out, an' give the signal for the boss that he was wantin'. Afore long he come out, an' never givin' me a chance fer to tell what was up, told me to hang around thar cluss, ready fer to take keer o' McKee, which he was pretty sure somebody would try to run off afore mornin'."

"It'd take a Philadelphia lawyer to make head or tail o' one o' your reports, Ham Belcher! Whar was McKee—how'd he come thar—why didn't Simon make sure of him—"

"McKee was in the house; he come thar on his own legs; an' Simon did make sure o' him—tuck him pris'n'er afore 'em all. He felt sure the gal meant to run the critter off, jist fer spite, an' as that was the easiest way fer to git him out o' the house, he left the rest to me an' went back ag'in."

"'Twas nigh day afore I see anythin'. Then two critters come 'round the house, an' I cut along to git in ahead o' 'em. As Simon counted on, it was the gal an' McKee. She give him a knife an' pistol, an' 'vised him to cut hot-foot fer head-quarters an' tell the boss what he hearn Simon say."

"You tuck him, then?" impatiently.

"Sartin. I follered him ontel I knowed the gal couldn't hear nothin', then I bounced the coon. Afore he knowed what was up, I hed his han's tied ahind him an' a chunk atwixt his jaws, makin' him walk Spanish fer the den, whar I got afore sun-up."

"Then whar's your 'portant business—"

"Jest comin' to it," grinned Belcher. "That about McKee was only to explain how I come to know 'bout the rest. The boss told me, afore he went back to the shanty. The Crimson Clan's goin' to clean out old Denbree, to-night. We're to git thar ahead o' 'em, an' rake in the bull kit, ef so be Cap'n Moonlight is along."

"How are we to know that?" demanded Sweet William.

"This way. The boss is goin' to be one o' the gang. You all are to go over to Denbree's an' cache. I'm to lay low 'long the road, an' when the boss passes, he'll give me the word. Ef Moonlight is thar, we're to rake 'em in, as I said afore. Ef not, then the boss 'll use his powers to skeer 'em off afore any hurt's done, an' we all must help him. They ain't to be nobody hurt, mind ye, unless we kin bag the head devil, fer fear he'll skin out—"

"But if you are sure you know who he is—" began Leo, only to be interrupted by Sweet William.

"Though I'm 'morally' sartin, we ain't got no proof. That'll do, Belcher. You go an' let the boys know what's wanted o' them. I'll be soon a'ter you, tell them."

The man arose and glided away with a noiseless celerity that Leo could but admire.

"Here's some grub," said Sweet William, producing a chunk of cold meat and some corn-bread from one of his pockets. "Jest exercise your jaws on that, while I take a look at your hurt. Pity you got it jest now, when thar's a good prospect o' fun on hand—"

"That need not hinder me," said Leo, eagerly. "I feel quite strong enough—"

"I know it; but you'd git a fever in it, sure, an' then good-by John! No, you've got to lay by fer a few days. I'll look out fer your interests, as well as my own, an' ef all goes well, everybody 'll know who the real Cap'n Moonlight is afore another day's over. Let that comfort ye, an' while we're gone, do you turn in ag'in an' sleep all you kin. 'Tain't no ways likely thar'll anybody come by yere to disturb ye, but ef they do, don't make no fight. Jest give in quietly, an' I'll see that you git through all right."

Leo was not so headstrong as to reject good advice, and so abandoned all idea of accompanying his new-found friends. His wound dressed, his hunger and thirst appeased, he crept into his leafy refuge and soon after Sweet William bade him good-by, fell into a sound and dreamless slumber that lasted for hours.

Sweet William made all haste to the deep and lonely hollow in which his comrades had sought shelter and seclusion after the stormy fourth of July. Not knowing if the Vigilantes were still afoot, the old trapper made his way through the thickest of the timber where escape would be comparatively easy in case of discovery. No such annoyance took place, however, and when he reached the rendezvous, he found his men all

collected and waiting for him to lead them, in the absence of Simple Simon.

"You'll scatter an' go, one by one, to the hol-ler back of Denbree's pastur' lot. Git thar soon a'ter dark."

At the hour indicated the whole party were at the rendezvous, save Simple Simon and Ham Belcher. Smoking and talking were both strictly prohibited, and the time passed drearily enough to the watchers. When, two hours later, Belcher made his appearance, he was greeted as warmly as though he had been absent for a year.

His report cast a chill over the enthusiasm. There was to be no fighting, no captives taken; only a simple scare.

There is no particular necessity for going minutely into details, since the general result has already been given. "Simple Simon brought his 'powers' into full play. He was the dog and the man in the stable; his was the loud, angry cry that apparently proceeded from the farm-house, and it was this that gave the cue to Sweet William and his men. The old trapper gave a whistle, then he and his men broke cover, yelling loudly and discharging their pistols at every leap, but firing at random, not to kill or wound, and the rout was complete. The household was alarmed, but they never knew who had befriended them.

At a word from Sweet William, his men fell back toward the timber. Just before they reached this, a low, peculiar call came from the shade, and a minute later, Simple Simon was among them, laughing heartily over the complete success of his plans.

"Back to the hollow. I have a few words to say, and then I must join the rest of my fleeing friends, or they may suspect something."

He led the way until at a safe distance from the lot, where farmer Denbree and his assistants were collecting the terrified stock, apparently expecting another attempt would be made to steal them.

"I am pretty sure I know who this Captain Moonlight really is," he began, speaking rapidly; "but as yet I lack proof positive enough to convict him. Since we are all friends, I may say that the one I suspect is Gerald Evans."

"This, my first plan, failed, but I have formed another which I am confident will succeed. To-morrow, I mean to demand an interview with Captain Moonlight, to deliver to him an important message sent by the chief of the League. I will arrange it so as to have the meeting at Hark Foster's house. You will be concealed near the place—a regiment could find cover there—and at my signal, you will close in, capture all you can and kill the rest. Mind, not a soul must escape—man, woman nor child."

"To guard against any mistake, I will, as soon as all is decided, make a note of the hour and the kind of signal I will give, on a bit of paper, and drop it at the foot of the old oak tree that stands in a line with the spring and the house. One of your number can easily crawl up and secure it from there, without danger of being observed by any one around the house."

"Remember, to-morrow, before noon if possible. Be at your stations in good time. Captain Moonlight will be there, and *must* be taken, alive if possible; if not, then *dead*. If I am not suspected and shot before you can come up, I will make sure of—"

The sentence was never finished. An angry, hissing curse was blended with the bright flash and loud report of a pistol from the line of bushes hard by, and whirling half around, Simple Simon fell flat upon his face, without a groan!

Only for one simple fact the assassin would have had time to escape ere a hand could be raised to arrest him. Sweet William heard a faint rustle in the bushes, and his suspicions ever upon the alert, he dropped upon all fours and crawled like a human shadow toward the spot. Not in time to arrest the treacherous shot, though.

The assassin turned to flee as he saw his victim fall, but a dark figure shot through the bushes, and alighting fairly upon his shoulders, crushed him helplessly to the ground. An iron grip closed upon his neck, and carrying his prize much as one bears a puppy by the nape of the neck, Sweet William returned with his prisoner.

A match was struck and held close to the man's face—the face of old Hark Foster!

CHAPTER XXVII.

IN THE TOILS.

AFTER parting with Hark Foster on the edge of the little clearing, Gerald Evans wound his way slowly through the thick-growing timber, his eyes noting nothing upon which they chanced to pause, his legs carrying him onward of their own volition, his brain wholly busy in perfecting the details of a plan, foul and treacherous, by which he hoped to reap the reward of his long scheming and plotting. His eyes gradually dilated and filled with an exultant fire, his countenance was all aglow, his white teeth gleamed from beneath the curling red lip; until he seemed the very personification of devilish triumph.

"The very thing!" he muttered, baring his heated brow to the cooling breeze that softly

floated through the leafy aisles. "Fool that I was not to have thought of her before! She will do it, and this very night—why not? By this time to-morrow the worst will be over—a princely fortune won, or one more life lost through obstinacy—"

The sentence was left unfinished. A curious and, for the moment, unrecognizable sound came to the plotter's ear, and guided more by instinct than reason, he leaped swiftly aside and crouched down behind a stunted, scrubby bush, a pistol in his hand, a hard-set look upon his face.

It is in just such moments that the mask drops and a man is revealed to friend or foe for what he really is. Now the silken glove no longer covered the hand of steel. From a soft, effeminate, doll-like creature, Gerald Evans became a man, albeit there was a strong suggestion of the velvet-footed panther in his cat-like movements, in the greenish light that filled his eyes, and in the half-smile, half-sneer, that left bare his strong, white teeth.

For a moment thus, then he arose with a muttered curse. The sound was no longer a mystery.

"Some drunken brute, sleeping off the effects of his debauch," he muttered, glancing toward a clump of bushes from which the sounds proceeded.

He took several steps as though about to pass on, then paused, his curiosity faintly aroused. Who was the sleeper? Was it worth while to retrace his steps? A longer, deeper breath came from the thicket—a prolonged snore. Gerald Evans glided back, and cautiously parting the leafy branches, peered down upon the sleeper.

Upon such trifles a man's life sometimes hinges. Had Gerald Evans not heard that sound, or, after hearing it, had he obeyed his first impulse and hastened on to the town, how different might have been the ending of this story. But the finger of fate was in it all.

More than ever like a crouching panther just about to leap upon its unconscious prey, seemed Gerald Evans as he looked down upon the face of his unconscious enemy—the face of the man whom he hated above all others: Leo Friend.

Swiftly, yet noiselessly his hand sought his belt, and then the black muzzle of a pistol bore full upon the sleeping man's temple. A slight pressure of the finger which rested upon the trigger; nothing more would be needed. His enemy would die, without knowing what or who it was that cut short the thread of his life. No one else would know, even if the body was found that same day. If not found soon—even then he heard the grunting of some half-wild hogs—a few dismembered and scattered bones would be all, and who could read their mute story? The temptation was strong, and for the moment, Leo Friend's life hung upon a gossamer thread.

But then the fiendish smile deepened, the pistol was withdrawn, and stepping lightly, Gerald Evans entered the little dark inclosed space. His hatred was too intense, his nature too malignant for him to be satisfied with the sudden and painless death of his enemy. He should die the death of a criminal, and know to whom he owed his shameful fate.

Once decided, Evans did not lose any more time. Removing his coat and holding it outspread in both hands, he cautiously placed himself astride the sleeping form. The coat was flung over Leo's face, and at the same instant Gerald sat down upon the young man's stomach, his knees holding the arms of his enemy pinned tight to the ground, his fingers almost meeting in the flesh as they closed upon Leo's throat.

A silent but desperate struggle ensued. Upon anything like equal footing Gerald would have been but little better than a child in the grasp of the refugee, but now, cunning was mightier than thew and sinew. Painter and more weak grew the struggles of the outlawed man. Those fingers of steel were doing their work quickly, and never relaxed their deadly grip until Leo lay motionless, his muscles lax and nerveless, his senses fled and death fast following.

Little by little Gerald relaxed his grasp, until fully assured that his victim was not counterfeiting insensibility. Then he removed the coat and arose to his feet, a low, musical laugh parting his red lips. The revenge he had waited and longed for was before him. His enemy, his successful rival lay helpless at his feet. The hangman's rope was awaiting him. A few hours more and he would die the death of a dog, and his memory forever after be accursed as that of a midnight robber and cowardly assassin.

With such thoughts surging through his mind, Gerald Evans set about making his triumph assured. Removing the belt from around the waist of his captive, he split it in two, lengthwise, and tightly bound the hands and feet with them. A handful of moss was placed in the center of Leo's own handkerchief. The cloth was then twisted around to hold the stuff in place, and the gag thus formed, thrust between the jaws of the recovering man, and all made secure by the two ends being tied in a hard knot behind his neck.

"I suffered you to escape once, Leo Friend," he said, mockingly, as the angry eyes fixed

themselves upon his face. "That was because you appealed to me as one of the League, and death is the forfeit of refusal. Even now, were you to repeat that sign, I would be obliged to set you free, and for that reason I have bound you, hand and foot. I shall keep you thus, until you are safely delivered into the hands of the Vigilantes, and though I intend to be where I can see your death-struggles when they string you up, I will be where you cannot appeal to me as one of the family. By this time to-morrow, you will be beyond making any more trouble on earth; let that be your consolation."

"There is one more thing, I wish to tell you, as it is unlikely we will have another interview on this side of the grave. And, since I am quite sure you will never be able to take advantage of my candor, I will be very frank with you."

"We both paid our addresses to Miss Belle Gladden, and she had the ill taste to prefer you before me. She loved you; she hated if not loathed me. You see I am keeping my word."

"Last night I proposed and was finally rejected. There was a scene, and it ended with my getting kicked out of the house. Only for you, nothing of this kind would have happened, but I hold no grudge. It is always well to forgive the dying."

"To soothe your last hours, accept this delicious morsel. This very evening, Belle Gladden will keep an appointment which I am about to make. I mean to take her to a safe spot, where I can coax her to retract her cruel decision, and promise to become my bride. I have certain arguments in store which I am quite sure she will be unable to resist. You can guess what the principal ones are, so I need not particularize. While you are being hanged, and suffering the tortures of the damned, in mind and in body, remember that she you love is in my arms!"

Wrought to madness, Leo Friend strove to burst his bonds, but in vain. They were applied by a sure and cunning hand. Gerald Evans laughed mockingly.

"You will have an hour in which to try your strength and patience against them. At the end of that time, I will return with a carriage to take you to the gallows. Good by!"

He turned away, and with swift, eager footsteps he hastened through the forest nor paused until he reached the little, dilapidated cabin belonging to one John Johnson, a low, degraded, miserly wretch who was half-hermit, whole-rogue. It will be remembered that it was in his cart that Leo Friend was borne from the log jail by Mattie and Hark Foster.

Gerald entered the hut without ceremony, Johnson was bending over a small fire, despite the natural heat of the day, smoking a foul pipe and worse tobacco. His only salutation was a snapping snarl as Gerald entered.

"I've got a job for you, old man," said Evans, bluntly. "There's money to be made, if you know how to hold your tongue. Ha! I thought that would arouse you!"

"Money is good—I'll do anything for money!" and the withered old wretch rubbed his dirty hands together, the unholy fire of avarice glowing in his snake-like eyes.

"Can you keep a secret for a hundred dollars?"

"I've kept many a black and deadly one for much less than that," chuckled the miser. "Tell me how I can earn a hundred dollars. Anything short of murder—that comes higher."

"You remember Leo Friend—the young fellow who escaped the Vigilance Committee, and for whose capture, dead or alive, they offer a hundred dollars reward? Well, I have him in a safe spot—bound hand and foot. By turning him over to justice, I can secure the reward, but I don't want to do that, myself. You may have heard that he and I have been courting the same young lady. If I gave him up, folks would say it was because I was jealous. Rather than that, I would set him free, or give the reward to you. If you promise to never breathe a word of the bargain, I will turn him over to you, on conditions."

"What are they?" demanded Johnson, suspiciously.

"By no means hard. You are to bring him here and keep him close confined until noon, to-morrow. Or give him up in the forenoon; that will answer as well, after all. You can say that you found him asleep in the woods, and so took him prisoner. He won't live long enough to contradict you."

"What else? You wouldn't give up so much money, only for that," added Johnson, with a cunning leer.

"Don't judge me by yourself, old man. I do not make money my god, as you do. I have told you all there is for you to do. If you refuse, I can find others—"

"No, no! I will do it—I will earn the money—I will do just as you bid me," eagerly assented the miser.

"Very well. Go and hitch your horse to the cart, and I will show you where your game lies. Make haste!"

If Johnson had any further doubts, he did not give them utterance, but leaving the hut he uttered a long, peculiar call, which soon brought a shaggy little pony to his side. Throwing upon

its back a tangle of old rope and straps that served as harness, he hitched the animal to a two-wheeled, rickety cart, and announced his readiness.

"Follow me, then—but not too closely," said Gerald. "If we meet anybody, strike off as though upon your own hook. If I am connected with the affair in the minds of any of the people, I'll find out a way of getting even with you, in something more than money—mind that."

Without a word the old man followed at a respectful distance. Fortunately for their peace of mind, they met nobody on the way, and in less than an hour from the time he parted from his captive, Gerald was at his side again.

"You see, I am better than my word," was his salutation. "The carriage is not quite so fine as you deserve, but it will serve the purpose. Come, old man. Take his feet—so!" and the bound man was rudely tossed into the cart.

"Pull some leaves and branches to cover him over. Mind where you drive, and dodge any person whom you may see, or you'll lose your money, sure!"

Gerald struck out in advance, to serve as a sort of scout, but the precaution was needless. The hut was reached and Leo unloaded without their being seen by any curious eyes. Repeating his caution, Evans strode rapidly away.

Johnson squatted down before his prize, with grim delight. Leo strove to speak so earnestly that his face grew red and the big veins stood out upon his forehead and neck as though they would burst. The miser grew alarmed. What if he should choke—die smothered? Instead of the reward, he might be accused of murder, despite the significant words, "Dead or alive!"

Bringing a gourdful of water, he removed the gag, but Leo pushed the water aside, huskily muttering:

"Set me free for one hour, and I'll give you two hundred dollars, besides returning here for you to give me up, if you will. I swear it! More than life depends—"

The door flew open and a mocking laugh was heard. Gerald Evans entered, and said, sternly:

"Replace that gag, old man, and don't you dare remove it again. If you play me false, and accept his offer, I swear that you shall hang in his stead. Remember, I saw you riding with him, in your cart, aiding him to escape!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A BOLD STROKE FOR A WIFE.

BELLE GLADDEN AROSE and proceeded about her daily duties quite as usual on the morning succeeding the strange revelation made by the only parent she ever knew. But her face was pale and there was a deeper look of pain in her eyes. She had been tried almost beyond her endurance in the last few days. Her lover an outlaw, a price upon her head; her father a fugitive, accused of assassination, if indeed the blood of a murdered man did not really stain his hands. She fought against that fear, but it would return. She would not believe him guilty—yet the burden of proof was so overwhelming; and did not her mother—his own wife—believe him guilty of the crime?

In hardly better case was Anderson Gladden. He had come to look upon his niece as his own child, years ago, and to renounce his claim to her filial love was indeed a heavy blow to him. He noticed her agitation and depression, and, naturally but foolishly believed that she looked upon him something in the light of an impostor, who had covertly received the sacred love that belonged to another. And believing this, the sight of her sad face made him feel really guilty. He fought against the morbid feeling until after dinner, then took down his rifle and set out upon a long tramp through the woods.

Thus fortune was, apparently, aiding Gerald Evans in every quarter. Had Anderson Gladden remained at home as customary, or had he returned at an earlier hour—but he did not. The hand of fate was in it all.

The sun sunk to rest, leaving a blood-red trail behind it. The scarlet deepened to crimson, then purple, until the rich wine color faded away and blended with the sober gray of twilight.

Belle, tired of waiting supper, had sent the black woman over to the town, in hopes of finding Anderson Gladden, whose prolonged absence was causing her no little uneasiness. She was sitting upon the front porch, musing deeply.

A dark form crossed noiselessly over the stile and neared the maiden, whose head was lifted with a start, as the faint sound of footsteps forced themselves upon her hearing. A woman, from the drapery, but who? The face was hidden beneath a sunbonnet, and Belle did not recognize the figure at first.

"You are alone? There is no one near enough to hear my words, besides yourself?" whispered a deep, peculiarly impressive voice, and the woman cast a swift, suspicious glance around her.

"I do not know you," and Belle arose, half-alarmed.

The woman threw back her sunbonnet. It was Nell Larkin, widow of the man for whose murder Leo Friend was outlawed.

"You need not be afraid," and the ex-actress's voice sounded low and mournful. "I have been bitterly wronged, but my heart is too sore for me to cherish resentful feelings toward even those who have bereaved me. You I have learned to love, from the words of one who sent me here to-night— You are sure no one can overhear us? It might be death to him who sent me—"

The maiden's heart leaped wildly. Those words, she felt, could only refer to one, to Leo Friend. It was only by a powerful exertion of will that she said, clearly:

"There is no person about the place but us two. What do you mean? Who sent you to me?"

"One whose name must not be spoken here. They are hunting him to death—Gerald Evans and his friends. He must flee for life—must be far away from here before another day dawns—but he cannot go without one word with you. He bade me add my pleading to his prayers—what he has written here. Read it, and as you hope for mercy hereafter, do not refuse the first—it may also be the last—request of one who has the right to command your obedience."

As she spoke, Nell Larkin slipped a small bit of paper into the maiden's hand. Bewildered, confused, Belle read the few lines it contained. A cry of pain broke from her lips, as though some heavy hand had stricken her a cruel blow.

"Remember, he is your father," uttered the voice of the woman. "More sinned against than sinning. It may be the last chance that will ever be given you for obeying him. Before another day he may be dead, even if you grant his prayer. If you refuse, he will die certain, since he will not flee until he has seen you. They are hunting him hard and fiercely. Can you hesitate, knowing that his life hangs upon your decision?"

"I will go—where is he?" asked the maiden, faintly.

"At my house. Get your bonnet and a shawl, quickly. You must not be recognized, or the truth may be suspected."

Too utterly bewildered for reflection, Belle obeyed, hastening to her room and returning with breathless speed. Nell Larkin grasped her arm and held it firmly, resolved that her victim should not escape her toils. Keeping in the densest shadow, and making a circuit around the village to avoid observation that might produce unpleasant consequences when the abduction should become known, an hour's fast walking carried them to the rude dwelling where the drover's widow lived.

All was still and dark around the place, usually so uproarious with the voices of children. But an answering signal came from within, as Nell Larkin tapped at the door.

"Remember," she breathed in her trembling companion's ear, "it is your father who awaits you," then opened the door and pushed Belle over the threshold.

A pair of strong arms received her in a close embrace, and warm lips were pressed ardently to hers, stifling a little cry of alarm. Nell Larkin entered and closed the door, then struck a match and lighted a candle.

A shriek of terror that was promptly checked by the palm of the man's hand—two laughs, one malignantly triumphant, the other hard and contemptuous. The base imposition was revealed by the dim light of the tallow candle. In the man whose arms were embracing her so closely, almost fiercely, Belle Gladden recognized Gerald Evans.

"The more you struggle, the worse you will be treated," he said, with a sneering laugh. "Submit to the inevitable, and lady never had a gentler guardian than I will prove to you."

"Let me go—you have no right to detain me—"

"Might makes right, darling. Last night it was your turn, and Anderson Gladden's; to-night it is mine. Though you may be angry now, or think you are, the time will come when you will thank me for this gentle force—"

"Enough of this, Gerald Evans," interposed Nell Larkin. "I have faithfully performed my part of the contract; keep yours, and then go your way. I will run no more risk, and if you are wise, you will lose no time in getting your prize under safe cover. She may be missed at any moment, and if the old man once strikes your trail, I pity you!"

"The money is there, on the table. Count it and satisfy yourself. Then go bring up my horse," he said, tersely.

"I'll take it on trust, because I know you dare not deceive me," laughed the woman, leaving the house.

"Now, darling, as you are about to take a long ride in the damp night air, I must guard your lungs against the cold—and giving me trouble. You must pardon me, but really I cannot help this seeming rudeness, though it cuts me to the heart's core."

With a rapid dexterity, Gerald Evans twisted a silk handkerchief around the maiden's head, leaving her nostrils free enough for respiration,

but effectually sealing her lips against all danger of outcry.

"Come," impatiently uttered Nell Larkin, opening the door. "Your horse is ready. Give me the girl. Mount, and I'll hand her up to you afterwards."

"Handle with care. That little package is worth an even half-million to me," he laughed as he sprang into the saddle. "So! now my bonny bride, for a wild gallop through the forest at night, as an ante-nuptial trip!"

Touching his free spirited horse with the spur, he dashed swiftly along the winding bridle-path, soon striking the lonely road that led to the Foster cabin.

Belle seemed utterly crushed in spirit, unable to struggle against the cruel fate that awaited her. With a low laugh, Gerald Evans congratulated himself upon the ease with which his dangerous plans were being wrought out. Leo Friend a prisoner, in a fair way to die upon the gallows for a crime which he never committed; and Belle Gladden a helpless captive in his hands, with a large fortune almost within his grasp. The devil indeed was aiding his own!

Mattie Foster was alone at the house, having sent Nancy away for the night. Though the girl was perfectly trustworthy and wholly devoted to her mistress, it was decided to trust no more than was absolutely necessary.

Promptly at Gerald's signal, Mattie opened the door, and held the horse while Evans carried Belle into the crimson room. As he returned to put up his animal, Mattie hastened back to her rival, her ill-trained heart in a wild tumult.

Gerald found her amusing herself much as a cat plays with a helpless mouse. Nor was he at all averse to joining in the delectable sport. The poor girl was like a lamb between two wolves.

"Mercy? yes! The same kind of mercy which you showed me, when you lured my lover from my side; only you sought to rob me of a husband, while I am helping to secure you one. And yet, I am merciful. You will be far away from here with your husband, and so will not be an eye-witness of the happiness of those whom you strove to separate."

"You are speaking in riddles, Mattie," said Gerald, a malignant devil in his eye. "You remember the signs made by Leo Friend, last night, at your house, darling? Those signs said that he was a member of the Crimson Clan, and so he is, though not Captain Moonlight, as people think. Thanks to your beauty and sweet lips, he was for a time inclined to throw off his allegiance to the League, and in consequence came very near meeting the reward of a traitor. But an interview with this lady brought him to his sober senses, and he was received once more as a true and worthy member. To prove his earnestness, he is at this moment robbing old Denbree of his horses. One week from to night, he will marry Miss Mattie, here."

"That is a lie, base as your own heart!" cried Belle, angered beyond endurance by the insult-er's taunts.

"Leo Friend is a man, and as such, which do you think he would be most apt to choose—you or me?" cried Mattie, proudly, rising erect with outstretched arms. "You, a pale, doll-face, weak and insipid as skim-milk—"

Just how far the woman's anger would have carried her, will never be known, for at that moment a shrill whistle came from without, but so deadened by the rapid trampling of hoofs, that its exact purpose could not be guessed.

The same fear was written upon the faces of both conspirators; that the Vigilance Committee was afoot, perhaps upon the trail of the abducted maiden.

"Give me warning if it is them," hissed Evans, looking to his pistols. "I'll make my mark upon some of them!"

Mattie did not wait for him to conclude, but left the room and took a stealthy peep outside. Only for a moment her suspense lasted, then she flung wide the door. The riders were two of the men who went out to rob Denbree. Stopping on the road to secure their own horses, they had hastened to spread the news of their ill-success among their friends.

"I knew he was a traitor—that Hunter!" hissed Mattie, in a rage.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A HARD FIGHT FOR LIFE.

"WHO did the p'izen critter shoot?" demanded Sweet William as he bore his struggling captive back into the little glade. "Who was it he massacred?"

"It's the boss—shot plum' through the head," was the prompt, though low and almost awe-stricken reply.

"Ef you've killed him, old man," and Sweet William tightened his grip upon the prisoner's throat; "may the Lord hev mercy on your sinful soul, fer durned ef I do! You fellers—all but Dan scatter an' hunt fer p'izen snakes. Rub out all you cain't take captive. Don't let even the shadow o' one git away, ur the bull preformance is dished. Skoot!"

The old trapper's orders were instantly obeyed. Handing his captive over to the man called Dan, Sweet William added:

"Ef he kicks around too much, or tries to

break loose, jest plug him with a knife, or weight him with a chunk o' lead. It'll save me the trouble o' 'nihilatin' him in a minnit."

Sweet William bent over the recumbent form with a dull pain at his own heart, as he saw the red blood flowing down over Simple Simon's forehead. Whatever the nature of the bond between the two men, it was founded upon a strong affection, almost love.

Using his forefinger as a probe, Sweet William uttered a low, gurgling exclamation of delight as he followed the course of the bullet. Turning his head he addressed Hark Foster:

"You was a fool in three ways, old man. Fust, fer burnin' powder 'thout makin' sure thar was a way open fer you to git clean off. Second, fer not shootin' at his body, which is a bigger mark an' easier hit. Third, fer not makin' lowance fer the moonlight, which is powerful deceivin' an' sure to make a man overshoot."

"Lucky for me he was not as wise as you, old man," and Simple Simon sat up, his voice faint and unsteady, but otherwise not much the worse for wear.

"You hain't got no right to git up afore I'm done doctorin' of ye—it's an insult to my larnin'—"

"Can't stand on ceremony now, old friend; there's too much work on hand. Just tie this rag around my head, and I'll be all right. So! I'm worth a dozen dead men yet!"

"I'm a wuss fool then he said!" grunted Hark Foster, in a tone of utter disgust. "If I ever git another chaine—"

"That you'll never have. By this time tomorrow, you and all your friends will be beyond making more trouble for honest men. Ha! not much—"

With an eel-like twist and a display of strength truly remarkable in an old man of his slight frame, Hark Foster twisted himself free, at the same time hurling his guardian headlong a dozen feet away. But ere he could improve his advantage, he was borne to the earth by Simple Simon, in whose grasp he was but as a reed. In little more time than it takes to record the act, his hands were bound behind his back and a gag secured betwixt his gaping jaws.

Simple Simon arose and thrusting two fingers into his mouth, gave vent to a shrill, prolonged whistle. Five minutes later, in obedience to the signal, his followers were all gathered within the little glade. Each man reported the same; that, so far as they could learn, Hark Foster was alone in spying upon them.

"So much the better for us, then. Our plans will remain the same. Be sure that you are all within hearing of Foster's cabin, before noon, to-morrow, or rather to-day. You," addressing Sweet William, "will return to where you left our young friend. If he is able, take him to the den, from there to the rendezvous. The rest of you will take this fellow with you to the hollow. Watch him closely. If he attempts to escape, kill him if you cannot hold him. Otherwise, treat him as kindly as you can, consistent with safety. As for me, I must return to the cabin, or they'll suspect I am playing them false."

"Better take one o' our hosses, then, to make up fer lost time," suggested Sweet William.

Five minutes later, Sweet William was hastening toward the spot where he had left Leo Friend; Simple Simon was riding swiftly to the Foster cabin; Hark Foster was being conducted to the deep hollow where Justus McKee was then a helpless captive.

Though his heart was on fire, the old man's thoughts were black and gloomy enough. When the alarm was first raised at the stable, his affright was genuine enough, but ere he had run a quarter of a mile, the suspicions instilled in his mind by Gerald Evans, returned with redoubled force. Where was the man who called himself Thomas Hunter? Up to a few moments since, they had been close together. Why had the feller dropped off without a word of warning?

Enough that fate led Hark Foster to the spot where Simple Simon was divulging his cunning plans, though not in time to overhear more than the concluding portion of his speech. That was more than enough. The pretended friend was a traitor, and through him great danger threatened Mattie Foster. Without a thought of the danger he himself was incurring, Hark fired at the spy. The deceitful moonlight obscured the sights of his pistol, and as a natural consequence he overshot his mark. And now he was a captive, while the spy was free to carry out his cunning and treacherous plot.

Still the old man did not utterly despair. The one redeeming trait of his character was his passionate love for his child. For himself he cared nothing, but he resolved to escape in time to save her from the cunning and fatal snare.

An hour later they reached the deep and gloomy hollow, and Hark Foster was dumped down beneath an overhanging rock, his feet bound tightly together.

Wearied with their night ranging, the men lost little time in arranging matter to their liking, then, leaving one of their number to stand

guard, they wrapped themselves in their blankets and lay down to sleep.

Though a midsummer night the air in that deep ravine was damp and chilly. The guard raked together the few live coals, piled a few twigs upon them, and fanning all with his breath, kindled a fire. Topping the flame with a couple of larger fagots, he lit his pipe and squatted down before the genial blaze, occasionally casting a careless glance toward the two captives.

Justus McKee was sleeping soundly, and Hark Foster, to all seeming, was the same. This was far from being the case in reality. More than ever he was resolved to effect his escape before the day dawned. After that it would be too late.

This was not the first time that stout bonds had been applied to his limbs, and the experience gained in those bygone days stood him in good stead now. Little by little he was working the bonds loose that confined his wrists, keenly watching the sleepy sentinel through his nearly-closed eyelids, ceasing work whenever the man lifted his slowly-drooping head with a start of wakefulness.

Already his plans were mapped out. One of the men was lying directly in front of him, at right angles. In a restless movement the blanket had partially dropped away from his body. The red glare of the fire-light was reflected from the brass-bound butt of a pistol in his belt. Upon the side nearest his feet, though lost in the deep shadow, Hark Foster could just distinguish the buck-horn haft of a stout, long-bladed butcher-knife peeping from the man's girdle.

His limbs once freed, ample weapons awaited his grasp. If the sentinel fell asleep so much the better for himself. Then it would only be a cautious creeping beyond the circle of fire-light. If not—if he awoke sufficiently to realize what was going on—what was the life of one man, or even a dozen lives, compared with the safety of his idolized child? No more than a single grain of the dust one tramples beneath one's feet.

The moon creeps on and hides its round face behind the bushy tree-tops beyond the ravine. The darkness increases. The flames of the little fire die out. The glowing coals are sheathing themselves in a thin coating of ashes. The head of the sentinel hangs forward, his chin upon his breast, his breath growing more and more audible as it is forced through his nostrils.

A slight quiver agitates the frame of the old man, and his eyes glow through the gloom like those of a wild beast, for his hands are now free!

Slowly he inclines his body, and one wiry arm is extended until the skinny fingers hover over the handle of the knife in the belt of the sleeping man. Firmly but gently they close upon the haft—inch by inch the bright blade becomes visible as the weapon is cautiously slipped from its sheath.

The head of the sentinel is lifted erect with a jerk, and his eyes fly open. The old man's arm is swiftly withdrawn, and a flash of light seems to follow it as his body rests once more against the damp rock and his eyes close.

The sleeping man stirs uneasily, but does not awake. The sentinel yawns, rubs his eyes, arises, his gaze still fixed upon the old man. Peering through his bushy eyebrows, Hark Foster watches him. Is he coming to see if the bonds are all safe? If so, he comes to his death! and the stout knife is grasped with the fierce energy of desperation. One swift, steady stroke of the trusty steel—one instant for cutting the thongs at his ankles—then a rapid flight to save his loved one from the shameful death that threatens her!

But the time is not yet. The sentinel pushes the coats together with his foot, adds more fuel and then sinks down to keep his lonely vigil. He renews the tobacco in his pipe and smokes long and deliberately. The minutes are passing with frightful rapidity, as Foster can tell by his covert glances at the sky above. The steadily moving stars are his time-piece. They tell him that the day is drawing near, that each passing minute renders his chances of ultimate escape more and more desperate. Will the sentinel never yield to the combined influence of the night, the soporific fumes of tobacco, the warmth of the fire?

Another hour, and the day will dawn. The sleepers will awaken, and all that he has done so far go for less than naught. Better death than such an ending!

The smoke puffs are coming slower and slower. The sentinel is beginning to yield, but Hark Foster dares wait no longer.

The keen blade steals down and severs the stout thongs. His lower limbs are slowly gathered up. He does not arise, but slides forward just as he sits. Twice he pauses, as the sentinel raises his head, but a half-sleeping man is not too critical. And now he is close beside the sleeping man who is to furnish him with weapons.

The skinny hand moves forward and closes upon the butt of the pistol. One moment—but the sleeper starts—he feels the strange hand at his waist and awakens. Swift and sure the

long blade flashes downward and buries itself to the very haft in the unfortunate man's bosom; then Hark Foster leaps to his feet, the cocked weapon in his hand.

A sharp, gasping cry from the lips of the death-stricken man. The sentinel starts up with a bewildered cry of warning—the last conscious sound that ever passes his lips.

The stolen pistol speaks venomously—Hark Foster leaps forward, spurning the quivering corpse of his second victim, then is swallowed up by the darkness that shrouds the deep hollow like a funeral pall.

He hears the wild shouts from the spot he has just left, followed in a moment more by hasty, heavy trampling, rushing footsteps; a floundering through bushes and stumbling over hidden bowlders. The avengers of blood are upon his track. His heels must save his head, for, if overtaken now, he dies the death of a dog!

His goal is six miles away, as the crow flies, and he takes the ground as it comes, for he dares not attempt to double or choose the easiest course. If no more than his own life was at stake, he could laugh his pursuers to scorn. A true-born fox, he would baffle the oncoming hounds and laugh at the feat. But something far dearer than life depends upon his exertions. He knows that the enemy will send all or part of their force by the shortest route to the cabin, to surround it and cut him off from betraying their cunningly-laid plans.

So he breasts the steep hills, plunges down the deep hollows, running as he had never run before, heeding not his bruised and bleeding feet, his blood-streaming limbs, arising from his many heavy falls, unconscious of pain, with room in his brain for but one thought—his heart of hearts, his idolized daughter, was in deadly danger, from which he alone could save her.

A terrible, killing struggle. A stern, deadly race for more than life. Borne on by a pure and holy love that might well have condoned for even blacker sins than were upon the soul of this rude, unlettered man, the race deserved a different ending.

Another mile—one more dogged burst. His brain is reeling, even now, yet he will not fail while breath lasts. He cannot hear the sounds of pursuit—could not though a squadron of cavalry were charging down upon him—his heart throbs so fiercely! The hot breath hisses between his tight-clinched teeth as he flings every ounce of fast falling energy into the last desperate effort.

The sun is rising—he catches a glimpse of his little cabin on the hillside—there are human forms slowly moving about before the door—and one of them is his daughter.

He strives to cry aloud—to bid her flee; but in vain. The warning sticks in his parched, cracked throat.

How he breasts the slope. One hundred yards more, and he will reach the little clearing. His heart bounds suffocatingly, for he feels that the race is run.

So it is, but he is the loser, not the victor.

He bursts into the clearing—he utters a hoarse, inarticulate cry. The same instant a curl of blue smoke puffs out of a bush hard by—there is a spiteful crack—and Hark Foster falls headlong, a bullet through his bursting heart!

CHAPTER XXX.

SWEET WILLIAM AT WORK.

Sweet William paused, with a quick glance around him to make sure he had not mistaken the spot, then repeated his signal, louder and longer than at first. He listened, but no answer came to his expectant ear.

"Must be he's still snoozin', fer 'tain't no ways likely he'd go away from yere a'ter what I told him."

The old man pushed through the narrow fringe of bushes, and peered down upon the spot where he had left Leo Friend, but it was vacant. The moonlight shone down into the tiny glade with sufficient brightness to show that much.

Once more Sweet William repeated his signal, this time so loudly that the woods around re-echoed back the sounds of his voice. But he was calling one who could not answer, even had he heard the summons.

For the first time Sweet William began to suspect the truth; that his young friend had been surprised and carried off by some of his enemies.

"Ef so, an' I ain't in time to save him—"

The ellipsis was more significant than if the sentence had been properly completed. It said that Sweet William would exact a deep and deadly vengeance for his friend, if his cunning daring should be unable to save him from harm. And that unspoken vow would be religiously kept.

He knelt down and with face close to the surface, endeavored to read whatever the earth could tell him, but the faint moonlight failed him. He could tell by the sense of touch that the soft soil was trampled and torn, but that was not all. Leo himself might have done all this. He might even then be only a few rods away, soundly sleeping.

With swift, noiseless steps, the old trapper be-

gan quartering the ground in every direction, searching every bush and brae, leaving no spot where a human being could possibly have sought cover, without examination, ever and anon cautiously repeating his signal. In this he persisted until it was impossible to longer doubt. The young man was gone, whether voluntarily or taken captive by some among his many enemies.

Reluctant and slow as he had been to admit this probability, the moment his doubts were dissipated, Sweet William went to work systematically. It was no difficult matter to find material for making a serviceable torch among the timber, and five minutes later, the old man was bending over the spot where Leo Friend had been taken prisoner, reading the mute but eloquent story told by the torn and trampled earth.

His own more recent tracks confused him a little. Enough was left uncovered for his purpose. He saw that a single man had effected the capture, and hence he felt sure that Leo had been surprised while sound asleep.

He saw where Gerald Evans had left the spot, and the next moment came upon his returning tracks, followed by the hoof-marks and wheel-ruts of Johnson's cart.

He searched the ground more carefully, and now saw that his own feet had obliterated the traces left by Johnson as he helped Evans lift Friend into the cart.

"That looks more like it," he muttered, nodding his head. "Ef the boy'd 'a' let one man take an' kerriy him off, I'd 'a' bin tempted to let him hoe his own row. As it is, I'm gwine to git him out o' this hobble, or bu'st somethin' wide open—fer a fact!"

Aided by the flickering torch, the old trapper started along the trail of the wagon wheels, making rapid progress at first. But after a short cut through the timber, the trail came out upon the road, and here the actual work of the trapper began. His first object was to ascertain in which direction the cart had gone; no easy task, since at least two wagons had passed over the road after the cart entered upon it.

Kneeling down at the edge of the road, Sweet William closely scrutinized and carefully measured the hoof-prints left by Johnson's pony. Then, aided by a fresh torch, he inspected the road, inch by inch. A dozen yards below the point where the cart entered the road, he found what he was searching for, and rose erect with a long breath of relief.

"Tain't so bad as I thought," he muttered, wiping the perspiration from his heated brow. "I made sure the toes'd be p'inted the other way. They hain't took him to town—then who in thunder an' guns kin they be?"

Without attempting to answer his own question, Sweet William set out along the woodland road, not attempting to follow by the hoof-marks, but contenting himself with making sure that he did not pass the point where the cart had left the main road.

Half an hour later he found where the cart turned aside into the timber, and feeling that the trail was growing hot, he pressed on with renewed energy.

For half a mile, all went well, but then the trail entered upon a tract of rocky, barren ground, where it was soon lost. Sweet William strove in vain to regain it, and was finally forced to acknowledge that the attempt was worse than useless, by the faint, uncertain rays of the flickering torch.

The twinkling stars told him that the dawn of day was at hand, and feeling that until it came to aid him, his work would be labor spent in vain, the old man lay down at the base of a huge bowlder and almost instantly fell asleep.

Sweet William was one of those few persons to whom sleep is a servant, rather than a master, and at the first gleam of the rising sun he awoke and started to his feet. Lighting his pipe and drawing his belt a hole tighter by way of breakfast, he began quartering the ground like a hound seeking to regain a lost scent.

Ten minutes later he was successful, and from that time on he was never once baffled, though his progress was slow until after the rocky tract was passed over.

A part of the truth forcibly struck him, as the trail took a sharp turn and struck off through the timber once more.

"It's old Johnson's cart, but who was the other fellow? Can't be Gerald Evans. He wouldn't dar' go ag'inst them signs, unless he could strike a sure blow, like a snake in the dark, an' nobody nigh to tell tales. Must be one o' them Vigilantys run acrost him an' tuck him pris'ner to hev that sentence duly kerried out."

Though feeling sure that the trail would end at Johnson's cabin, Sweet William stuck faithfully to the trail. He felt sure that Leo's captors did not intend to take him to the village, since their present course was leading them almost directly away from it. Why, he could not even surmise. The whole affair was a mystery to him.

A few minutes more carried him within sight of the rude cabin. Before the door stood the rickety cart. Just beyond grazed the ragged

pony. No human being was in sight, and the place seemed quite deserted.

Taking advantage of the tall grass and weeds, Sweet William crawled up to the rear of the shanty. Not a sound came from within as he listened, and cautiously removing a portion of the clay chinking from between the unhewn logs, he applied his eye to the aperture thus formed.

All was gloomy and indistinct within, and for a few moments he could make out nothing. Then there sounded a dull, muffled stamping, and guided by it, his gaze fell upon a bound form lying in one corner.

It was that of Leo Friend, bound hand and foot, and securely gagged. Lying with his face toward the point where Sweet William had approached, he had seen the chinking removed, to be replaced by a glittering human eye. Finding that his situation could be no worse, he raised his bound feet and let them fall again upon the puncheon floor, with the dull thump that had sharpened the old trapper's eyesight.

As the action and sound were repeated, Sweet William knew that the prisoner must be alone within the cabin, and hastening around to the door, he tried the rude latch, only to find it fastened. Stepping back a pace or two, he plunged forward, his shoulder striking with resistless force against the shacking door, tearing it from its hinges and hurling the wreck half-way across the room. Sweet William followed it, headlong, but heedless of his bruises, he scrambled up and greeted his young friend with a chuckling laugh.

"I never did see the feller as was harder to keep track of then you! You're wuss then a hen with one chicken. I won't never feel easy 'bout you until we've got ye married off to a wife as 'll keep close watch over ye both night an' day—nur that won't do, unless she's powerful good at puttin' the grapevine lock onto ye—"

While speaking, Sweet William was not idle. His first move was to cut the string that held the choking gag in place. Then he freed Leo's hands and legs. It was while busied with these, that the young man, after several ineffectual efforts to speak, managed to gasp:

"Vigilantes—he's gone for them!"

"You mean old Johnson? I thought so," he added, as Leo nodded. "Waal, when they come, they're welcome to all they kin find. Hark!—H—land blazes!"

From without, ringing sharply upon the rocky soil, came the heavy trampling of iron-clad hoofs, and clearing the space between him and the door at a single bound, Sweet William beheld a sight that wrung from his lips the grating curse recorded above.

A dozen horsemen were riding rapidly up the narrow valley, led by the tall figure of the miser, Johnson, who, though upon foot, kept in advance of the riders. It needed not a second glance to decide who and what the men were. The loose black robes—the cowed head and covered face—they were the dreaded Vigilantes.

Sweet William turned and lifted his young friend to his feet, but Leo was unable to stand. His limbs were benumbed, and escape by flight was an impossibility.

"Save yourself—you can give them the slip among the rocks," muttered Friend, sinking back upon the floor.

Sweet William returned to the doorway, but it was not with the desperate hope of flight. He even smiled as Johnson uttered a cry of angry dismay as he saw the open door, and coolly nodded to the leading horseman as he rode up.

"Sarvent, boss, an' mighty glad to see ye," he said, as the chief dismounted. "Keep back, you!" thrusting Johnson forcibly aside as he attempted to enter the cabin. "Your man is inside, boss, but afore you take him, I ax one private word with you. It'll be best fer all consarned ef you do."

"Stand aside," the chief said, sternly, pressing forward.

The old man obeyed without a word. The chief entered, followed by three of his men. At his command they bound Leo's hands behind him, and half-led, half-carried him forth.

"Now, sir," addressing Sweet William, "what have you to say? You, too, are under suspicion, and unless you can clear yourself you must accompany us as a prisoner."

"What I've got to say is fer you alone. Step over yender a bit. Ef you're afeard let your fellers keep me kivered—"

Paying no attention to this sneer, the chief led the way to a spot beyond ear-shot of the rest, saying:

"Speak out, and to the point."

"Jest sling your eye over them dockyments," and Sweet William produced a thin package from his bosom.

"You are a government detective, then?"

"Sent yere to root out this gang o' p'izen hoss-thieves an' man-killers, o' which the Crimson Clan is a part—yes, sir! You see I'm authorized to call out whatever men I choose to help me—an army, ef I like. That's enough 'bout me. That young feller is 'cused o' bein' 'Cap'n Moonlight, an' o' killin' Don Larkin. He ain't the one, nur he didn't do

the other, as I can prove. Afore night comes I'll show you the ginewine Cap'n Moonlight, an' I'll prove that Don Larkin was killed on the night afore they swore he was killed when he was robbin' an' murderin' two drovers."

"You can prove all this, you say?" demanded the chief.

"I kin—an' more. But mind: you ain't to breathe a breath o' what I've told ye. You want to take Leo Friend an' hold him onder guard. Don't even let your men know that he ain't to be hung. You kin pick the best o' your men an' come with me. Ef I'm lyin'—"

A long, hoarse cry came to their ears, and the figure of a man was seen running up the valley toward them at full speed. There could be no mistaking that giant form. It was that of Anderson Gladden.

An agonized cry burst from the lips of Leo Friend, and he strove desperately to free himself. He alone divined the cause of the giant settler's agitation.

"Help! I ax vengeance! they've kerried off my Belle—my daughter!" gasped Gladden, falling to the ground completely exhausted.

CHAPTER XXXI.

TO THE RESCUE.

"BEING a woman, Miss Foster, you are privileged, but let one of your men repeat your charge of treachery and I'll cram the foul lie down his throat with a pistol muzzle!"

Despite her fiery rage and undoubted courage Mattie Foster sunk back with a superstitious thrill as these words came out of the darkness in answer to her passionate denunciation of the man whom she knew as Thomas Hunter. But she quickly rallied, as Simple Simon rode out of the gloom and stood before her in the dim light.

"I still believe you are a traitor, if not a spy," she said, coldly. "I shall investigate this matter, and at the faintest proof of foul dealing on your part I'll scatter your brains to the winds with my own hand!"

Simple Simon dismounted with a low, careless laugh. Pausing before the irate beauty he doffed his hat and gently tapped one finger against the blood-stained bandage that encircled his head.

"My defense is here. One-half inch lower and there would have been no brains left for your avenging bullet. For the satisfaction of us both I beg that you will condescend to play the part of surgeon. You can judge whether the wound is a fictitious one, and I—my wound will heal in half the time, if cared for and touched by your fair fingers."

Half-angry, half-confused, Mattie hesitated. There was something strangely perplexing about this man. She felt that she hated, distrusted him, yet she could not gainsay his will. As he entered the cabin, she followed. He removed the blood-stained bandage, and, without a word, she proceeded to wash and dress the wound. She saw that his words were true; that he had escaped death by a hair's breadth. Neither a friend nor himself would have dared to inflict such a wound. Could it be that her instincts were at fault—that he was indeed a good man and a true?

One by one the men came in, until all but Hark Foster had assembled. Their story coincided. The old man had been with Thomas Hunter when the alarm was given. If one had escaped, why not both?

Mattie cast many a doubting glance toward the spot where Simple Simon lay placidly sleeping beneath the old tree. Her suspicions were growing stronger with every minute. It was daylight—the sun was rising—and as yet no sign of her father. Then—

A hoarse cry that was not recognized—a ragged figure that was—an ambushed shot—and Hark Foster lay quivering upon the ground in the throes of death, a leaden bullet through his heart!

The scene which followed was one of the wildest confusion. Several of the outlaws fled in abject terror. Others grasped their weapons and stood at bay. Simple Simon, with wonderful swiftness, darted to the side of the fallen man, and put his hand upon his heart. It was still, and a long breath of relief parted his lips as he was pushed rudely aside. Those lips were sealed in death, and would never betray him now. With this reflection, Simple Simon made a swift, peculiar motion as he faced the point from whence had sped the death-shot. That sign told the marksman that all was well, that he might seek safety in flight.

Mattie knelt over the corpse of her father, her lips pale, her eyes hot and tearless. It seemed as though her heart was withered, her eyeballs seared. The only being on earth who really loved her was dead, assassinated.

"May the hand wither that fired the cowardly shot—"

As though the curse had aroused him to a sense of duty, Simple Simon raised his voice and called upon the men to follow him and avenge the death of their comrade.

He was obeyed, but their quest was in vain. He led the search until the shrill blast of a horn, coming from the clearing, caused his followers to desert him without a word.

Aroused by the wild tumult, Gerald Evans came rushing forth. He saw Simple Simon lead the outlaws into the woods, and a moment later a man came running up the road and paused beside the stupefied maiden.

"I rid my boss to death, fetchin' the news," the man gasped, by snatches. "He's bin tuck—they're callin' out the Vigilantes fer to hang him. I left Jim to watch whar they went—he'll bring word 'long the road—"

"Who do you mean? Who has been taken?" demanded Mattie, arising, her lips even whiter than before, the terrible truth flashing upon her mind even as she spoke.

"Leo Friend—old Johnson brung the word to town. I hearn him ring the big bell that calls out the Vigilantes, an' hearn a man say it was fer Leo—"

Mattie turned sharply, and found herself face to face with Gerald Evans. Something in the twitching of his lips gave her a suspicion of the truth. Her face flushed hotly, a menacing glitter filled her eyes.

"If your hand is in this, Gerald Evans, as I firmly believe, you have dug your own gravel! Though you hide your head in the bottomless pit, I will seek you out and exact blood for blood!"

Without pausing for reply, the infuriated woman brushed past him and sped toward the stables. Grasping a horn that hung beside the door, she sounded one shrill, prolonged blast, then flung a saddle upon the back of the white mustang, drawing the girth until the creature wincled with pain. Hurriedly adjusting the bridle, she led the animal forth, just as the outlaws hastened up in response to her signal.

"To horse!" she cried, her voice sounding harsh and strained. "Mount and follow! we must ride for life and death! Haste—there is no time for idle questions!"

"She is mad—the old man's death has crazed her!" cried Gerald Evans, drawing near. "If you follow her, you will ride to your death. The Vigilantes are up—"

A howl of pain cut short his speech. With a hissing imprecation, Mattie urged her horse to his side, and the raw-hide whip in her right hand cut the air with a vicious whistle, alighting fairly upon his face, laying open his cheek and both lips. Quick as thought he drew a pistol, but the lash again descended, this time across his hand, and the weapon fell from his benumbed fingers.

He partially stooped to regain the weapon, but an ominous growl awoke him to a sense of his danger. A dozen pistols were bearing full upon him. Certain death awaited his further struggle.

"Take that as a foretaste of what awaits you, if what I suspect is the truth," cried the infuriated beauty. "I command these men, not you. Am I speaking the truth, men?" she added, turning toward the outlaws.

A united cheer was the prompt response.

"Enough! to horse—and ride for life along the road to town. One hundred dollars to the man who first overtakes me!"

The white mustang was off like an arrow fresh from the bow, amid the enthusiastic shouts of the outlaws as they sprung to their horses, each eager to win the promised reward.

Under whip and spur the white horse flashed along the woodland road, up hill and down, every muscle strained to the utmost; yet still the cutting rawhide descended and the biting spur scored its white flanks until the blood-drops trickled down and fell upon the dusty earth.

Behind came the dark riders, those in front exulting, the rearmost cursing furiously and punishing the horse that had not speed enough to win the prize. On like madmen—and unconsciously riding to their death!

One-half the distance was covered, when Mattie Foster heard a loud cry and caught a glimpse of a gesticulating figure beside the road.

With cruel force she jerked upon the heavy curb, throwing the mustang upon its haunches so far that it would have fallen over backward, only for the sharp spur that buried itself in its flank. Stung by the pain, the bewildered creature regained its feet, and stood trembling like a leaf.

"What is it—quick!" hoarsely demanded the woman as she recognized in the figure the man called Jim, who had remained behind to watch the course of the Vigilance Committee.

"Young Friend—the one you told us to watch fer—he's took."

"I know—where is he? What have they done with him? Oh! why do you stammer and halt—can't you speak out?"

"He's safe enough," and the fellow instinctively flung up one arm as though to guard against a blow, as Mattie urged her horse still nearer. "I was layin' low 'mong the rocks over Johnson's hut, an' hearn 'em say it—"

"Say what? I'll quicken your tongue with a bullet, if you don't tell me at once!" raged the woman, drawing a pistol.

"In jail—they tuck him thar," spluttered the fellow. "I can't talk no faster'n I kin, ef you shoot me a dozen times."

At this moment the leading outlaw dashed up, with a cheer of triumph, and Mattie, now as-

sured that Leo Friend was in no immediate peril of his life, cooled down at once, and by a few sharply put questions, learned enough for her purpose.

By this time, the entire party had collected, ten men in all. Raising her hand to secure undivided attention, she spoke:

"One and all, I ask you to remember the solemn oath you have taken. On penalty of death as an unworthy member of the family, it binds you to risk your lives in defense of a brother-member, no matter what the odds may be. I am about to test your faithfulness now. One of our number lies under sentence of death in the jail, yonder. We must rescue him or meet the doom of traitors. The task will not be so difficult. The jailer is one of us. If there are any other guards, shoot them down. One stout effort, all united, and the job is done. Can I depend upon you?"

The response was unanimous, and in the affirmative, but that the task before them was anything but agreeable, the sullen, hang-dog expression of their faces, plainly showed.

"Very good! I felt sure I could depend upon you. The time has come when Leo Friend can throw off the mask and be known to all for what he really is—a true and trusty member of the Crimson Clan. So don your masks, one and all. Let all who have eyes see who it is that makes this rescue!"

In silence she was obeyed. Hats were removed and secured. A close-fitting hood of crimson cloth was drawn over each head and down to the shoulders. Two round holes in front allowed their eyes to look forth. That donned by Mattie only differed from the rest in being made of silk.

A single glance to assure herself that all was in readiness, then Mattie led the way at a rapid gallop down the road. Ten minutes of hard riding brought them within sight of the jail, which, as before stated, was some little distance from the town.

To all appearance it was deserted as, with drawn pistols, the Crimson Clan dashed up to the door. Mattie sprung to the ground and striking upon the door, cried:

"Open, Jones—in the name of the family, open!"

As by magic the bars were removed and the door opened, the jailer, white-faced and trembling, appearing in the aperture.

"Fer God's sake go 'way! The Vigilants 'll kill me—"

"Out of the way, or I'll save them that trouble. You dare not go against your oath," cried Mattie, pushing past him, with drawn pistol.

As once before, under somewhat similar circumstances, Leo Friend confronted her. As before, he was unarmed, but now his limbs were left at liberty.

"I am come to save you," cried Mattie, eagerly grasping his arm. "Come! the rope—a shameful death awaits you here. Come—I will save you—"

"I would rather die the death of a dog, by the rope, than owe my life to you, Martha Foster."

Cold and deliberate were the words, cutting like a knife. Mattie shrunk back with a cry of pain, as though a rough hand had rudely grasped her heart-strings. Only for a moment—then, with a hard, unnatural laugh, she said:

"If not by fair means, then by foul! Go with us you shall, and if you are roughly handled, blame yourself."

"You must kill me then—I'll not be taken alive."

As he spoke, Leo retreated until his back was guarded by the log wall, fight written upon every feature.

"Take him, men!" cried Mattie, her eyes glaring. "Take him, but alive. The man who harms him, dies by my hand!"

There was a fierce rush—a few stout blows that hurled more than one outlaw headlong to the floor—a confused struggle; then Leo Friend was pulled down, half a dozen stout men holding him, despite his frantic efforts to break free.

At that moment a startling cry came from without.

"The Vigilantes are coming! To horse! and ride for your lives!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE LAST RESOURCE.

COWED by the threatening looks and ready pistols of the outlaws, Gerald Evans drew back, wiping away the blood that oozed from the purple wale left by the whip of Martha Foster. Never a word did he speak until after the fair fury had ridden away, followed hot haste by all save himself and two others of the party. These two remained in obedience to a covert signal, though with evident impatience. Not every day were they given a chance to win a hundred dollars.

Gerald laughed shortly as he noticed this.

"You will thank me for holding you back before another day. Those who follow that mad girl are riding to their death. The Vigilance Committee are afoot, and she means to rescue Leo Friend from them—to destroy the band for her crazy love of a man who hates her. They

are three to one—you can guess how it will end."

"What sort o' work is it you've got fer us to do?" asked Jake Ramsel, knowing from experience that Gerald Evans troubled himself little concerning the welfare of others unless he himself was to be the gainer thereby.

"Work that will in all probability save you from stretching hemp, that will certainly be fifty dollars apiece in your pockets. In one word: will you volunteer, or shall I order you, by virtue of my commission—"

"You only need to tell us what you want," interposed John Hopper. "Ef two men kin do it, we will."

"Good enough! You, John, take our three horses and start off down the road. Get under cover, then take to the timber and circle around until you *cache* in the thicket back of the cabin. Wait there until we come. Be off now!"

Motioning Ramsel to follow him, Evans turned and entered the house. Nancy, white-faced and trembling, met them at the threshold. To her Gerald spoke:

"Bar the door and don't let anybody enter—mind, I say *nobody*, or it'll be the worse for you."

Mechanically she obeyed. The awfully sudden death of Mark Foster had almost stupefied her brain.

With a sign for Ramsel to follow, Gerald passed through into the crimson room. At his entrance, Belle Gladden, pale and baggard, sprung to her feet and stood like a fawn at bay. Evans laughed, shortly. Critical though the situation was, he felt a peculiar pleasure in the horror his presence inspired in this girl. After his own fashion he loved her, and promised himself a rare treat in breaking her will, in forcing her to yield obedience to his wishes.

Brushing past her, he unfastened the hidden door through which Martha Foster had conducted Justus McKee, then turned to Jake Ramsel, saying:

"Go see if the coast is clear; then come back here."

Closing the door behind his coadjutor, Gerald turned toward Belle Gladden, speaking in a sharp, determined tone:

"Something has happened that causes me to alter my plans concerning you somewhat. I intended this should be your bridal chamber, but that cannot be now. I am going to take you a two days' journey on horseback. Just how you will be treated depends mainly upon yourself. If you act the fool and are obstinate, then I will drug you. If, on the contrary, you are sensible and yield to the inevitable, you shall be treated as kindly as the circumstances will admit. Go you must, in one way or the other. Take your choice."

"I will not go with you alive—"

With a cat-like leap Gerald was beside her, one arm wound around her waist, his other hand clasped tightly over her lips, stifling her shriek in its birth. Despite her desperate struggles, his steel-like muscles held her helpless until Jake Ramsel returned and entered the room.

"Quick!" growled Evans. "There's a bottle in my pocket. Take it out and wet yonder handkerchief with what's in it. Now tie it over her face—so!"

In a few moments the baleful drug began to take effect. The maiden ceased her struggles, and her limbs hung limp and nerveless.

Evans removed the cloth and thrust it into his pocket for further use, if required. Then, bidding Ramsel bear the captive, he led the way out of doors and, keeping well covered by the dense undergrowth, hastened toward the spot where John Hopper was already in waiting, with the three horses.

Mounting his horse, Evans held out his arms for the maiden, whom he supported upon the saddle before him.

"Up with you!" he muttered, hurriedly. "Keep a good look-out. If you find anybody spying upon us, put him beyond telling of what he has seen. It is life or death now."

Though far from fully understanding the crisis, the ruffians were quite ready and willing to carry out the orders of their leader. They were bound to obey him as far as their lives went.

Leading the way at a rapid trot, Gerald Evans did not draw rein until full two miles from the Foster cabin. Thus far he had kept to the unbroken woods, but the progress made was not satisfactory, and he resolved upon a bolder course.

"We must take to the road," he said, baring his heated brow. "But first, I'll tell you just how we stand. You already know that Leo Friend is in the hands of the Vigilantes, and that Mattie Foster has led the boys to rescue him, or, rather, to share his fate. She lied to them. Leo Friend does not belong to the band, but is one of our most bitter enemies. That fool girl is crazy-mad for his love, and swore to me that if harm came to him she would blow the whole thing—tell who all belonged to the league, and who it was killed Don Larkin. To save your necks as well as my own, I bade you stay. The fellow will be dead before she can get there, and in her fury she will expose everything."

"But she tuck the oath—" began Hopper.

"She would break ten thousand oaths in her madness. Our only hope is in speedy flight. I'll not feel safe until at head-quarters, and the sooner we get there the better. We'll strike out for the road, now. One of you will ride in advance, and if you see any one, on the road, give us a sign. We'll take to the timber again until the danger is past. Lead on, Ramsel."

Nothing more was said. Riding as rapidly as the rather difficult nature of the ground would permit, the kidnappers made the best of their way to the wagon-road. Upon this they could travel twice as fast, and, with proper precautions, Evans did not think the danger would be much greater.

Just as they turned into the highway, Belle recovered her senses. Her head was resting upon the shoulder of her abductor, her face turned backward. Though conscious, the effects of the baleful drug were still felt. Her limbs and body were as though paralyzed; only her brain was alive and active. She knew that she was being borne far from home and friends, yet she could not struggle against the dread fate. So quiet did she lie in his arms, that Gerald never suspected that the power of the drug was passing away.

Suddenly a convulsive thrill agitated her frame, and as Gerald strove to look into her face, she shrieked aloud:

"Help! for the love of Heaven! save me!"

With a grating curse Evans turned his head and glared back. The road was empty. The sight he dreaded did not greet his gaze. Surely she had seen no one!

With a short, angry laugh at his own folly, Gerald once more wound the drug-moistened cloth around his victim's face, then urged his horse on. But that cry for help was yet to bear fruit. If nothing else it aroused John Hopper to increased vigilance, and he rode with beard upon shoulder henceforth. And a few minutes later he uttered a sounding oath.

"She was right, boss! *Thar's somebody a-follerin' us!*"

"Ride on, you fool—don't make a sign," hissed the leader, angrily. "Watch your chance and signal Jake to wait for us—wait until you can catch his eye. Then you two must make a dash back and take that fellow. Your lives as well as mine depend upon it. He must not get away—*kill him!*"

Five minutes later Ramsel's eye was caught, the signal was made, and while Evans rode on with his captive, the two men, with drawn pistols, made the backward dash.

With fierce eagerness Gerald listened for the report of their weapons, but in vain. A few minutes later he heard the trampling of their horses' hoofs, and when they came in sight, alone, he knew that his plan had failed.

"Did you see him? was it anybody following us?" he demanded, as the two men drew alongside.

"We see his tracks, that's all. He tuck to the timber at the point whar I fust ketched a glimpse o' him. He'd bin follerin' us—leastwise he was comin' this way. So the tracks said," moodily responded Hopper.

"Thanks to your cursed folly in letting him see that he was spotted!" remarked Evans. "Ride on, Jake, as before; only keep an eye on me."

For a mile more Gerald rode on, his brow wrinkled, his brain busy. But then his lip curled with a malignant smile, as he believed he saw his way out of the woods.

At a sign Hopper drew alongside.

"If any one is really following us, we will bag him if you are careful and follow my directions. We will ride ahead at full speed until we come to the ford. You and Jake will stop there, hide your horses and take cover, one on each side of the road. Wait there two hours, if the fellow don't come before. If he does come, make sure of him. You can pitch his body into the hole below the ford. I will ride on and wait for you at the Blue Rock. You understand?"

Hopper nodded, with a grim smile. This sort of work just suited him. No fear of his falling short of the limit given him by the "boss."

Touched by the spur, their horses dashed forward at augmented speed, and they quickly overtook Jake Ramsel. As they galloped along, side by side, Evans repeated what he had told Hopper. The communication was received in much the same manner as by the first ruffian. Gerald was quite satisfied. If anybody was following them as a spy, he would never pass the ford alive. Of that he felt assured.

Half an hour later the ford was reached, and Gerald rode on alone with his captive. Fearful of trusting the drug, of which he knew but little, he removed the handkerchief once more, assuring himself that the maiden was still alive, though unconscious.

For two hours more he kept on, but riding more slowly, listening intently for the sound of wheels or hoof-strokes from ahead. Though the road was but little traveled, some one might be using it, and a meeting would be especially disagreeable, now that he was alone, and incumbered by a lifeless body.

His fears were unfounded. He reached the rendezvous—nearly half a mile from the road

—in safety. A deep hollow, through which wound a small brook. A large mass of slate-stone stood beside the stream, and the spot was known far and wide as Blue Rock.

Dismounting, Gerald tied his horse, then bearing the unconscious maiden to the edge of the stream, he laved her face and neck freely in the cold water. For some time his labor was in vain, and he began to fear that all this risk was run in vain—that the maiden would never again return to life. But then, with a faint sigh, Belle opened her eyes, only to shrink back with a shudder, as she recognized the hated face bending over her.

Gently placing her upon a mossy bank, Gerald drew aside, and lighting his pipe, fell into a deep reverie, while waiting for the coming of his followers. That his reflections were not unpleasant was plain from the smile that now and then curled his dainty lip.

What those thoughts were matters not now. They were fated never to be realized.

Ere many minutes more he was aroused from his musing. Faint and indistinct there came to his ears the echo of a whistle. Starting erect he drew a pistol, bending forward in an attitude of acute listening.

Again that whistle, this time clearer and more distinct. Crooking one finger in his mouth he answered the signal in kind, his eyes aglow. All was well—the spy was disposed of!

"Waal, boss!" came the voice of Hopper, from the right.

Gerald wheeled quickly, and as he did so the bushes parted behind him. One mighty leap, and a man stood close behind him with uplifted hand.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

WHO KILLED DON LARKIN?

UNTIL that moment—when Anderson Gladden appealed for help to the Vigilance Committee, as he sunk to the ground completely exhausted—Leo Friend had believed those words spoken by Gerald Evans were empty boasting, merely uttered to torture him. But the truth came upon him now, and in hurried tones he told all he knew, and branded Gerald Evans as the villainous kidnapper.

"Who among you all have seen Gerald Evans since night before last?" demanded the chief, addressing his followers.

"I saw him jest afore sundown yest'day, comin' away from Widder Larkin's place."

"An' I saw her goin' into Gladden's house after sundown last night, as I was goin' home," volunteered another; and at his words Gladden sprang erect with a hoarse cry, holding up a crumpled scrap of paper.

"I found it in her room; it says trust the bearer—that must mean Nell Larkin!"

"One moment, Mr. Gladden," interposed the chief, as the giant turned as though he intended rushing to the Larkin cabin. "You have placed this business in our hands, and you must allow us to do the work in our own way. You are too terribly excited to manage a woman like Mrs. Larkin. You can bear us company, but you must not interfere unless your aid is requested."

"Save her—that's all I ax—only save my darlin'!"

Sweet William locked arms with the stricken giant, and though his words were inaudible to the others, they had a strangely calming effect upon Gladden.

Leo Friend was placed upon horseback, one of the Vigilantes mounting behind him. The chief paused to utter:

"It is no more than right that I should tell you, sir, I begin to believe that you have suffered a cruel wrong. If it proves thus, I will do all I possibly can to make amends. Your friend yonder promises to make all clear before night. Until then, you must consider yourself a prisoner. If you are innocent, a few hours more of detention will not be seriously felt, so long as you know that friends are working to clear your name. Promise me you will not attempt to escape, and you shall not be bound."

"You say you believe I have been wronged; let me go on parole, so I can help rescue Miss Gladden, and I'll not only forget your hunting me down, but will remain your debtor for life."

"That won't do at all!" interposed Sweet William. "The sight o' you goin' free'd tell the pizen sarpiants we was on the right trail, an' mebbe they'd give us the slip ag'in. No; you go to the pen, an' wait patiently fer the end. I give you my honor as it'll come soon, an' be even brighter'n you ever dar'd to dream—it will so!"

By a judicious doubling-up, both Gladden and Sweet William were provided with a mount, and with Leo Friend in the center, the Vigilantes started for the jail at a rapid trot. Closely dogging them was the outlaw who afterward intercepted Martha Foster to tell her where Leo was confined. He succeeded in escaping observation, and only left the trail when he saw the heavy slab door close upon the prisoner. Had his ears been as keen as his eyes—could he only have overheard the words spoken to Leo by the chief of the Vigilantes, this story would have had a far different ending.

Having implicit confidence in the fidelity of

Jones, the jailer, the chief deemed it wholly unnecessary to leave a guard at the prison, the more so that there was no likelihood of the prisoner's attempting to escape. From what Sweet William said, their whole force might be needed to capture the Crimson Clan; and then there was the affair of Gladden's daughter. A guard could not be spared.

Leaving the jail, the party rode at speed direct to the Larkin cabin. As they drew near, Nell Larkin, aroused by the confused trampling of hoofs, appeared in the doorway. The flush died out of her face as she saw the black-robed riders, and she cast a quick glance toward the neighboring timber, like some hunted animal meditating flight; but the same glance showed her that escape would be impossible. She saw Anderson Gladden in the company, and then she knew what was coming. Yet she schooled her features and met the danger with a dull, stolid composure.

Riding up close, and bending forward in his saddle, the chief addressed her, speaking slowly, his eyes reading her face through the holes in his mask.

"Last night you carried a note to Miss Belle Gladden. After reading that note, she left the house in your company. Where did you take her to, and what for?"

"If you know so much, you should know more," the woman said, with a short, hard laugh. "But I deny the charge."

"When did you see Miss Gladden last?"

"On the 4th; not since."

"You were seen going into Gladden's house, last evening. If you lie on one point, you will lie upon all. Confess who employed you in this dirty work, and possibly we may overlook your part in it."

"And if I refuse—if I persist in telling the truth—what are you going to do about it, sir mask?"

"You will be no longer a woman, but a criminal who must be made to speak, in the interests of justice."

"That is, you will lynch me?" she demanded, flushing.

"Exactly," was the cool reply. "We will spare your modesty as much as possible, but if you refuse to speak out of your own accord, you shall be tied up and flogged until you confess all: who were your accomplices, and where Miss Gladden was taken."

"Ef you'll tell, I'll give you a hundred dollars—" eagerly began Gladden.

The woman was only too glad of an excuse for yielding, other than that of the lash, and said, quickly:

"The man who employed me, gave me that much, but if you outbid him, I'll tell you the whole story."

"I'll double it—only speak out—be quick!"

"Very good. There are witnesses enough here to hold you to your bargain. You're to give me two hundred dollars, and I'm to be held harmless—"

"You are playing with fire, Nell Larkin," interrupted the chief, impatiently. "Don't try for too much, or you may fare the worse. Speak out at once."

"Gerald Evans hired me to take that note and bring the girl here. I was to make her believe that her father was in hiding at my house. I did make her believe it—I did bring her here—and Gerald Evans bore her away, before him on a horse, to the Foster cabin, if I am not mistaken. There! is that plain enough for you?"

"Plain enough, if it is true," was the significant reply.

Anderson Gladden, as he heard his worst fears confirmed, uttered a horse roar of rage, and would have started for the Foster cabin on a full run, only the strong hand of Sweet William restrained him.

"Wait a bit, mate, an' I'll keep you comp'ny. Ef the pizen sarpiant tuck the gal thar, he's run his head in a trap that'll hold him fast enough. You ain't fit to be let run alone. You'd spile the hull thing. I want jest a word 'long o' the boss, yender, then I'm ready fer ye."

Drawing the chief aside, Sweet William uttered a few hurried words in his ear, then rejoined Gladden. The settler was trying to borrow or buy a couple of horses, so great was his eagerness to reach the spot where he believed his dear one was held in bondage, but Sweet William promptly vetoed the bargain.

"We don't want to git thar too soon, an' we kin keep out o' sight better by our two selves, then if we hed hoss-critters along. You keep at my heels, an' never fear but I'll take you thar quick a plenty."

As soon as they disappeared, the chief acted upon the hints given him by the old trapper.

"Now, Nell Larkin, there's another point for you to clear up, before you can consider yourself fairly out of the woods. Remember, the threat I made before, still holds good. Tell me—who killed Don Larkin?"

If this question took the woman by surprise, her face did not show it. Not a muscle quivered, not a feature changed. Her big, black eyes met the gaze of the chief for a moment, then slowly drooped.

She knew that evasion would not avail her now. Women had been lynched, and might be again. So she made a virtue of necessity.

"Needs must where the devil drives! One of two men killed my husband. What their names were, I do not know; but neither of them was Leo Friend."

"You will swear this?" demanded the chief.

"If necessary, yes. I know what you mean. On the 4th I charged Leo Friend with the crime. I was half drunk, then, and was paid for it, besides. Gerald Evans told me what to say and do, that day."

"Let that pass for the present. Who were the two men you spoke about? What were their reasons for killing your husband?"

"Self-defense, I suppose. Let me begin at the beginning, and you will save time," said Nell, seating herself upon the doorstep, coolly.

"In the first place, Don belonged to the order known to outsiders as the Crimson Clan. It was while working with them that he met his death, on the evening of the second of July—four and twenty hours before the time those men swore he was murdered by Leo Friend."

"At noon, on the 2d Gerald Evans came here, and told Don there was work to be done; that two drovers were upon the road, with plenty of money. As both were strangers, they would never be missed. That same evening, Don, Gerald, John Hopper and Jake Ramsel waylaid the drovers. One man was killed outright, but the other, though badly wounded, made a hard fight. In that fight Don was killed."

"Why was his death concealed until the next night?"

"That was Gerald's doings. He said it was so no suspicion could fall upon any of them, but he had another reason, as you all know, now. He wanted to put Leo Friend out of the way. To fix the crime upon him, he had him abducted and drugged, though I am sure Mattie Foster never knew the whole plot, for she was crazy for love of him—"

"Never mind that. Can you tell me the members of the Crimson Clan?" interposed the chief.

"I can—and more. If you swear to let me go my way unharmed, I will give you a list not only of the members of the Crimson Clan, but of the entire League, more than three hundred in number. I can tell you where they rendezvous, what signs, signals and passwords they make use of; in fact, everything concerning the organization."

"As an earnest, tell me the real name of the man who is called Captain Moonlight—"

A horseman came galloping furiously up the valley, and his shout arrested the speech of the chief. As the rider saw that he had attracted attention, he shouted:

"There's an attack on the jail! The Crimson Clan are rescuing Leo Friend! Make haste, or you will be too late to hinder them!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

HUNTED DOWN!

CUNNINGLY laid though his plans were, Simple Simon was forced to see them scattered to the four winds. When the runner brought word to Martha Foster of Leo Friend's capture, he was drawing the outlaws away from the real trail of the man who killed Hark Foster, and the sound of her horn took him completely by surprise. Not knowing just what it portended, he was rather shy about obeying the signal, and when he did get within ear shot, he only caught the concluding words, as Mattie dashed away, soon followed in hot haste by the eager outlaws.

Gerald Evans remained, and that decided Simple Simon. Instead of following the horsemen as he would have done if he whom he felt assured was Captain Moonlight had been one of their number, he hastened to see if any of his men had arrived at the rendezvous. He found two, and dispatched them in hot haste, one in quest of Sweet William and the other to the village to arouse the Vigilantes, with word that the Crimson Clan was afoot.

It was while thus employed that Gerald Evans and his two companions in villainy succeeded in carrying off Belle Gladden. Not wholly unobserved, despite their precautions.

Lying low beneath a scrubby, vine-wreathed bush, Ham Belcher saw them file past, and recognized each one of the quartette. He saw that the maiden was unconscious, and shrewdly reasoned that she was an unwilling companion of Gerald Evans's flight.

Ham Belcher's hand it was that caught Simple Simon's eye, waving a leafy twig, as he returned from sending off his two runners, and five minutes later he was in possession of the story. It was startling enough, but Simple Simon was equal to the occasion.

"Change clothes with me—quick!" were his first words, as he began stripping off his fantastic suit of rags. "Then pick up half-a-dozen of the boys as fast as you can, and follow after. I'll blaze the trail as I pick it up. That Evans is our man and he must be taken alive!"

Dressed now in a shirt and trowsers that fitted closely to his limbs, with a slouched hat, and moccasins upon his feet, Simple Simon started along the plainly imprinted trail like a blooded hound upon a breast-high scent.

Without checking his speed in the least, at every few rods he would twist over the top of a

bush, or jerk down some overhanging bough, thus marking the trail so plainly that those who followed might do so at full speed.

Despite this, Simple Simon used his legs so well that he came within earshot of the kidnappers just before they halted for the first time after leaving the cabin. He crept up so near that he heard every word uttered by Gerald Evans; heard him decide to take to the open road, and what precautions were to be used to guard against discovery.

He could have sent a bullet to the brain of any one of the trio; possibly could have shot down them all, one after the other, without much risk to himself, but that was not what he wanted. Gerald Evans must be captured, not killed, and to effect that he must bide his time.

Just keeping the party in view, he followed behind, blazing the trail as before, and was less than a hundred yards behind when the kidnappers entered the highway.

Here the real difficulty began, and a less self-reliant man must soon have lost all heart. The horsemen rode at a rapid pace. The day was hot and sultry. The undergrowth beside the road was too thick for easy traveling. If he kept in the road, a backward glance at any moment might discover him, when the difficulty of his self-imposed task would be doubled, if it were not rendered impossible. Never scrupulous, Gerald Evans would not balk at murder, if it became necessary to the success of his plans.

All this Simple Simon realized at a glance, but he did not hesitate. Pausing for a moment until the enemy were hidden by a sharp curve in the road, he darted swiftly forward, running by ear, keeping close to the edge of the undergrowth, ready to dodge under cover at a moment's notice.

These tactics he pursued until nearly a mile had been covered, now, as before, blazing the trail, but then the road entered upon a level piece of ground, running straight ahead without crook or turn for more than a mile. He dared not wait until they were out of sight, for he knew not at what moment they might choose to turn aside from the main road into one of the many bridle-paths which led into the timber upon either hand. So, crouching low, and hugging the shrubbery, he resumed his chase.

Before he had taken a dozen steps into the open, the captive maiden raised her head and uttered her appeal for help. Quick as thought, Simple Simon plunged headlong into the bushes, then paused to see if he would be followed.

That he was not, the reader already knows, but the trailer did not dare return to the road. His labor was doubled, but he did not falter. With muscles of steel, he tore on through the shrubbery, losing ground at every stride, sweat pouring off him, his heart beating like a trip-hammer, yet never despairing for a moment.

He was fully half a mile behind when he again ventured to take to the road. The kidnappers had disappeared around another curve, and feeling that now was his time to make up his loss of ground, Simple Simon darted forward at a rate of speed fairly marvelous in one who had already undergone such great exertion.

Fate, too, seemed against him. The curve was so much shorter than he had imagined that Simple Simon dashed out upon another straight stretch of road, in full view of the horsemen, whose pace had been moderated, before he realized his imprudence.

Swiftly as before, he sought cover, but not in time to elude the keen glance of John Hopper. Peering through the bushes, Simple Simon saw enough to feel sure that he had been discovered, and fully upon the alert, he pressed on, ready for action when the emergency should arise.

Five minutes later it came. He saw Hopper signal Ramsel, and waiting for no more, he ran a few yards into the timber, then grasped a low hanging bough and swung himself into a black-jack tree. The foliage was so dense that only by an actual search of the tree top could he be discovered, and that search the kidnappers did not make. They were poor woodsmen, and the trail left by Simple Simon was as a sealed book to them, and they soon gave over the search.

As their horses dashed by, Simple Simon descended. Now that his pursuit was suspected, he took greater risks, not daring to let the enemy beyond hearing, for he felt sure that a trap would be laid for him ere long.

The trap was set, but Simple Simon did not enter it, though his escape was a very narrow one.

Pressing on with unabated speed, he neared the creek. He could hear nothing of the enemy, but the fresh tracks in the road showed that they had but recently passed. When less than a hundred yards from the ford, he heard the ripple of the waters, as he paused to listen for hoof-strokes. The sounds came from directly ahead, and he knew that the stream must cross the road.

That was enough. Better lose a few rods of ground than to run the risk of being ambushed.

Plunging into the bushes, he swam the creek, holding his pistols and powder high above the water, made a wide circuit and struck the road again, quarter of a mile beyond.

A grim smile curled his lip as he saw that but

one horse had passed along the road instead of three. Rightly judging that this rider was Gerald Evans, he pressed ahead with redoubled confidence, feeling that success was but a question of time.

Barely an hour later than when Gerald Evans left the high-road with his helpless captive, Simple Simon entered the woods upon his track. The trailer exercised more caution now, for instinct told him that his game was making for his covert, to await the coming of his allies.

Presently the scent of tobacco-smoke came to his nostrils, and then, cautiously parting the bushes, Simple Simon peered out upon his unconscious quarry. A moment later, his plans were formed. Drawing back, he noiselessly stole around until beside the Blue Rock. Then, calling his valuable "powers" into play, he uttered a whistle that seemed to proceed from far away. Gerald started, but made no reply, until the second whistle sounded still nearer.

Simple Simon feared lest the absence of hoof-strokes would arouse Gerald's suspicions, but such was not the case. At the pretended call of John Hopper, Evans turned around, his back toward Simple Simon, who sprang forward, like a panther upon its prey. And here one simple oversight almost proved fatal to him.

The sun cast Simple Simon's shadow directly before the eyes of his enemy, and, quick as a cat, Gerald leaped aside, drawing and cocking his pistol. Striking him in the face with one hand, Simon grasped the weapon with the other, wresting it free. But in the struggle, the weapon was discharged, the heavy ball terribly shattering the outlaw's hand and wrist.

That ended the brief struggle, and five minutes later, Gerald Evans was lying bound, save for the one arm, which Simple Simon was attending to as carefully as though the sufferer was his own brother. The job was a difficult one, and the man's surgical skill was by no means first-class, but he finally managed to take up the principal arteries, and arrest the excessive flow of blood.

This done, he placed a gag in the outlaw's mouth, just enough to keep him from giving the alarm, and laid him under cover. Then he proceeded to reassure Belle Gladden that her danger was a thing of the past, and was speedily on the best of terms with her. He told her enough of his plans to make sure that she would not be an incumbrance when the emergency arose, then settled down to await the coming of John Hopper and Jake Ramsel.

He was not kept long in waiting. A shrill whistle came from the direction of the road so soon after his work was completed that he was uneasy lest they had heard the pistol-shot and would be suspicious; but such did not appear to be the case.

He replied to the signal, and a few minutes later the trampling of horses' hoofs became audible, and he prepared for hot work. His heart beat rapidly when the men halted, still beyond view, and called aloud to Gerald. But he promptly made reply, imitating the voice of Evans so admirably that Belle started in affright.

"All right—come on! What are you stopping for?"

The well-known voice lured the outlaws into the toils. As they pushed through the bushes Simple Simon arose and confronted them, a pistol in each hand.

"Halt! surrender, or I'll shoot you like two wolves!"

For a moment they stared in mute amazement, but then, as with one accord, they spurred their horses forward.

Two shots that sounded as one—and the horses fell headlong, shot through the brain. A heavy blow stunned John Hopper, and ere Ramsel could free himself Simple Simon was upon him.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE LAST OF EARTH.

GREAT was the excitement of the members of the Crimson Clan, as, flocking to the door of the log jail, they saw that the words of their alarmed comrade were only too true. The Vigilantes were indeed coming, and after a cool, yet headlong manner, that boded ill for whatever obstacle they found in their path. Cool, because their force divided, one half outpacing the other and bending in such a manner that less than two minutes would see them in possession of the rear and have the jail completely surrounded; headlong, because there was no flinching, no hesitation, though none knew better than they that the Crimson Clan had long and sharp teeth that none knew better how to use if driven to bay.

Men think rapidly in such emergencies. Their first impulse was to close the door and bid the enemy defiance from their wooden fortress, but that was of only momentary duration. There could be but one ending, whether the building was carried by swift, impetuous storming, or by the more prudent course of starvation. Those who were not slain outright would be taken prisoners, and that meant the rope—death by hanging.

There was but one thing to do. They must charge the enemy and trust to desperate fighting to carry them safe through the toils. Many

—perhaps the majority—would be killed in the collision, but some few would break through the lines and reach safety. And, each man trying to believe that he would assuredly be one of those few, the Crimson Clan uttered a united yell of fierce defiance and sprung to their horses.

In a muffled, unearthly cheer the defiance was flung back by the black-shrouded figures. Touched with the spur, each horse plunged forward. A cloud of dust—the heavy trampling of iron-clad hoofs,—the irregular, dropping fire of pistols—the shout of defiance—the wild yell of rage—the scream of pain—the heavy fall and hollow groan of death-stricken men.

Thus the Vigilantes and the Crimson Clan joined issue, fighting to the death, expecting nor granting quarter.

Freed from his assailants by the opportune arrival of the Vigilantes, Leo Friend scrambled to his feet as hastily as his manifold bruises would allow, and wiped the trickling blood from his eyes.

In the open doorway stood Martha Foster, blowing upon a small bone whistle. With a shrill neigh, the white mustang cleared the confused *melee*, using its heels freely, then paused before its loved mistress, extending its velvet muzzle to receive its usual caress. But the woman turned toward Leo, her heart upon her lips.

"It is your last chance—mount and flee for your life. She will bear you to safety—go, for the love of God! go while there is yet a chance of escape!"

"You have more cause to flee than I," said Leo, with a short laugh. "Those men are the friends of justice, and I am not afraid to trust my case in their hands. Besides—even if I knew that certain death awaited me here, I would rather meet it face to face than to owe my life to your aid. Go—you have done me all the harm you possibly could, but I would rather see you escape than fall into the hands of those men, if what I suspect is true."

This last sentence was unfortunate in one respect, since it raised a hope in the young woman's heart that could never be gratified. Gerald Evans said no more than the truth when he declared that Mattie Foster was "crazy mad for love of Leo Friend."

What she uttered, need find no place here, for they were words of a madwoman. Her whole heart was poured out in that short, passionate appeal that he would have mercy upon her.

With a gesture of aversion, almost of affright, Leo shrunk back and motioned her away. A change that was remarkable for its utterness came over her face as she read his gesture aright. Her face was pale as death, but there was a sweet smile upon her lips and a soft light in her eyes as she glided toward him. She bowed her head and pressed her lips to his hand, before he could divine her purpose.

"Good-by, Leo. God bless and prosper you. May you be as happy as I would have made you, had I been a better woman."

Ere he could reply, she turned and pulling the crimson hood over her face, sprung upon the white mustang and dashed toward the spot where the Vigilantes were thickest, gathered around the last of the Crimson Clan. She blew a shrill blast upon her horn, that drew all eyes toward her. In a clear, ringing voice, she cried aloud:

"You have sought for Captain Moonlight this many-a-day, but you could never find him, as long as he chose to elude you. Now, his work is done. See! I am Captain Moonlight!"

Two swiftly succeeding pistol-shots, and Martha Foster fell forward upon the neck of the white mustang, shot through the heart—dead, by her own hand.

The sun was setting, and twilight was falling over the deep hollow in which stood the Blue Rock.

Beneath the overhanging shelf of slate-stone, lay two captives, bound hand and foot, and gagged beyond the possibility of uttering even a whisper. They are John Hopper and Jake Ramsel, the perjured witnesses who attempted to swear away the life and honor of Leo Friend.

Gerald Evans lies beside the little fire, kindled more for its cheerful light than for warmth. His face is white, from the loss of blood, not through fear, though he knows that his race is run, and that a shameful death awaits him. A lack of courage is not one of his many faults.

Anderson Gladden and Simple Simon are seated a little to his left. Upon the other hand, Belle Gladden is lying in the arms of one whose lips are often pressed to her now contented and beaming brow. A man; and that man he whom we have known as Sweet William—now Wilfred Hastings, Belle's long lost father.

He has been telling her his story—a long and eventful one, to repeat which in full would consume far more space than can be spared here.

He spoke of his escape, of his wanderings and adventures in many strange lands. Of how, after years of exile, he returned to England to find himself forgotten, his wife and child gone, nobody knew where, his last relative dead.

At this point Simple Simon interposed. This

relative, an uncle whose life had been devoted to making money so utterly that he had found no time to get married, refused to believe in Wilfred's guilt, and hired him, a noted detective, though then so young, to unravel the mystery. A year later the uncle died. In his will he left ten thousand pounds to be spent in proving the innocence of his nephew. The rest of his immense fortune was bequeathed to Belle, to be given to her when she married or became of age. From that time Simon devoted his life to the quest, and finally succeeded in finding Hastings in the trapping grounds. Together they returned to England, and there found the proof that they sought; one of the men who committed the murder of which Wilfred Hastings stood accused. Armed with his confession, duly witnessed, they again crossed the ocean and searched until they found the chief criminal, Gerald Evans.

"You may as well own up, said Simple Simon, addressing his prisoner. I have proof enough to hang you ten times over if you had so many lives. Your confession is not really needed, for your accomplice has fully cleared Hastings, but he died before he could tell us just how the job was done."

"Hold that paper so I can read it," said Evans.

His request was complied with, and he saw that the detective spoke no more than the truth. He appeared to reflect for a few moments, then said:

"It is not through any love for you that I speak, but the fact is I am, and always have been, rather proud of that little job, or rather of the style in which it was worked up."

"Hastings knows why I hated him; he robbed me of every dollar I owned at cards. I don't say that he cheated, but he would ply me with liquor until I was drunk, and then fleece me at his leisure. From being a pigeon I turned hawk, and preyed upon other greenhorns, watching my chance to get even with him."

"It came, as you know. I struck the blow that killed the man, using his knife. The gold we kept and divided. The L. O. U.'s, and such notes as were of no use to us, we put in his room where they were found. We swore the crime upon him, and I am only sorry he was not hung. I did my best to have him, anyway."

"I learned of that old fool's will three years ago, and came over here to hunt up the heiress. I found her, and would have made her my wife had you not interfered," glancing toward Simple Simon, who just then turned around, a paper and pen in his hands.

"Read this over," he said, holding the paper before Evans, so the fire-light fell upon the writing. "I have taken down your words, and would like to have you sign the statement. It can make no difference to you, you know."

"Because I am to hang anyway, you think?" with a curious smile. "Well, think so, if it gives you any pleasure, but before this time tomorrow you will change your mind. The seed is not planted that is to grow the hemp for my last necktie."

Simple Simon laughed softly as he dried the prisoner's signature, then folded the paper and carefully stowed it away. His laugh was echoed by Gerald, but that was deemed mere bravado by his hearers.

There was only a little dry bread and cold meat with which to break their fast, but all were content. To-morrow they could eat; to-night they were too happy.

Father and daughter drew apart from the rest, and for hours they conversed in low, eager tones. Once Simple Simon chuckled and winked and nodded knowingly at the fire, for he heard them speak of Leo Friend, and in the glowing coals, he saw a pleasant sight—a fair young couple standing hand in hand before a venerable minister—

A faint sound coming from where Gerald Evans lay dissipated the pleasant vision, and remembering that strange laugh, he bent over the captive. But he was breathing softly, regularly, his bonds were all secure, and Simple Simon returned to his seat beside the fire and his comfortable pipe.

At midnight Anderson Gladden took the watch, and at early dawn he aroused the party, strongly agitated.

He had heard nothing suspicious in the night, but as day dawned he saw a pool of blood beside the captive. Stepping forward, he saw that Gerald had freed his sound hand, and with it tore the bandages from his wound, holding the wound open, even yet, though his limbs were cold and stiff in death!

CHAPTER XXXVI.

SAFE IN PORT.

THE next few days were full of hard, rapid work for Simple Simon, Sweet William and their men. Before the days of telegraphs, they dealt their blows in such swift succession and with such telling effect, that one week later the great and notorious League was a thing of the past. Honest men could once more breathe freely, and four-footed property was worth a great deal more, in consequence.

Neither Simple Simon nor Sweet William passed through the fiery ordeal unscathed, but

their wounds were by no means serious, and were not long in yielding to the tender care of Belle—no longer Gladden, but Hastings. They did not falter until their work was done.

What has already been hinted at, may now be plainly stated. An authorized detective, not only of England but of Missouri, Simple Simon, learning that Gerald Evans belonged to the League, joined the "family" and was duly sworn in. He had two objects in view. One was to destroy the dangerous League; the other was to gain indisputable proof of Gerald's guilt, not only of the present, but of the past.

Obliged to be guarded in his motions, it was some time before Simple Simon could learn just how Gerald Evans stood. That he belonged to the order just beginning to be known as the Sons of Dan, devoted to the interests of the Mormons, was easily ascertained, as was the fact that he bore a high office and was an influential member of the League regular. Simple Simon strongly suspected him to be none other than the mysterious Captain Moonlight, leader of the Crimson Clan, and went to work on that supposition, as we have seen.

The sealed order which he showed Mattie Foster, was a forgery, and the man, Justus McKee, was the simon-pure messenger dispatched by the chief of the League. But that did not prevent him from suffering death by hanging, three days after the Crimson Clan was exterminated, in company with half a dozen other worthies, among whom were John Hopper and Jake Ramsel.

These two ruffians were confronted with Nell Larkin, and the fact of their murdering and robbing the two drovers fully proven. In a vain hope of saving his life by turning state's evidence, Ramsel confessed their guilt and gave a minute description of the bloody scene in which Don Larkin met a richly deserved death.

The ruffian's hopes were worse than vain. His confession only knotted the noose more surely around their necks. The jury did not even wait for the judge to deliver his charge, but thundered forth the death sentence. If their course had been different, they would have run the risk of being torn limb from limb by the turbulent crowd which surged around them.

As the sun went down, its dying rays fell upon seven ghastly figures suspended by the neck from stout limbs. Not far from each shape stood a black-robed figure armed with rifle and pistols, keeping guard over the lifeless clay.

On the day after the trial, Leo Friend, now not much the worse for his wound so treacherously inflicted by Gerald Evans, led half a dozen men to the hollow where the murdered drovers lay. To remove the remains was impossible, and they were buried where their assassins had cast them.

What their names or who their relatives, was never known. No one ever came inquiring for them, and as time passed on their tragic story was forgotten by all, save those who assisted at their grim, thankless burial. Thus the shadows have had their turn. Blow them aside, and look upon a more pleasant scene.

The picture which Simple Simon saw in the glowing coals of the camp-fire, upon that never-to-be-forgotten night, was more than realized, one month later.

The little church was brilliantly lighted up, and crowded almost to suffocation, when Belle Hastings and Leo Friend were married. There were two fathers to give away the bride—or would have been, but that the short and simple form of the Methodist service did away with all that.

A short address, a shorter prayer; then Leo and Belle were man and wife.

If the ceremony was short, the length of the festivities which followed, more than made amends. The pavilion trembled beneath the tread of the merry dancers, and fairly groaned when, toward morning, old "Sweet William," aided by "Simple Simon" and the band of trappers, stepped upon the scene and went through the wild gyrations which constitute the Cheyenne marriage dance.

After the conventional honeymoon, the whole party, including Gladden, who sold his farm, house and stock, started for Merry England, where Wilfred Hastings was welcomed as one risen from the grave. His innocence was fully established; Belle's identity was proven and her fortune gained. A fine estate was bought, and though death has claimed the original possessors, the descendants of Leo and Belle Friend are still living.

This chronicle is not a history of Mormonism, and the subject was only introduced because, for a short time, the leaders of that stupendous fraud were so closely connected with the fortunes of some of our characters.

The discovery that the Danites were working in partnership with the Crimson Clan, proved the last feather, and the irate Missourians arose as one man, and never knew rest until the curse was driven across the borders of their State.

The rest is a matter of history, and to those pages the curious reader is referred for what further information he may desire.

THE END.

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